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ZOROASTER

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BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

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F. MARION CRAWFORD
1885

TO

My Beloved Wife

I DEDICATE THIS DRAMA

CHAPTER I.

THE hall of the banquets was made ready for the feast in the palace of Babylon. That night Belshazzar the king would drink wine with a thousand of his lords, and be merry before them; and everything was made ready.

From end to end of the mighty nave, the tables of wood, overlaid with gold and silver, stood spread with those things which the heart of man can desire; with cups of gold and of glass and of jade; with great dishes heaped high with rare fruits and rarer flowers; and over all, the last purple rays of the great southern sun came floating through the open colonnades of the porch, glancing on the polished marbles, tinging with a softer hue the smooth red plaster of the walls, and lingering lovingly on the golden features and

the red-gold draperies of the vast statue that sat on high and overlooked the scene.

On his head the head-dress of thrice royal supremacy, in his right hand and his left the sceptre of power and the winged wheel of immortality and life, beneath his feet the bowed necks of prostrate captives;—so sat the kingly presence of great Nebuchadnezzar, as waiting to see what should come to pass upon his son; and the perfume of the flowers and the fruits and the rich wine came up to his mighty nostrils, and he seemed to smile there in the evening sunlight, half in satisfaction, half in scorn.

On each side of the great building, in the aisles and wings, among the polished pillars of marble thronged the serving-men, bearing ever fresh spices and flowers and fruits, wherewith to deck the feast, whispering together in a dozen Indian, Persian, and Egyptian dialects, or in the rich speech of those nobler captives whose pale faces and eagle eyes stood forth everywhere in strong contrast with the coarser features and

duskier skins of their fellows in servitude,—the race not born to dominate, but born to endure even to the end. These all mingled together in the strange and broken reflections of the evening light, and here and there the purple dye of the sun tinged the white tunic of some poor slave to as fair a colour as a king's son might wear.

On this side and on that of the tables that were spread for the feast, stood great candlesticks, as tall as the height of two men, tapering from the thickness and heavy carving below to the fineness and delicate tracery above, and bearing upon them cups of bronze, each having its wick steeped in fine oil mixed with wax. Moreover, in the midst of the hall, where the seat of the king was put upon a raised floor, the pillars stood apart for a space, so that there was a chamber, as it were, from the wall on the right to the wall on the left, roofed with great carved rafters; and the colour of the walls was red,—a deep and glorious red that seemed to make of the smooth plaster a sheet of precious marble. Beyond,

beneath the pillars, the panels of the aisles were pictured and made many-coloured with the story of Nebuchadnezzar the king, his conquests and his feasts, his captives and his courtiers, in endless train upon the splendid wall. But where the king should sit in the midst of the hall there were neither pillars nor paintings; only the broad blaze of the royal colour, rich and even. Beside the table also stood a great lamp, taller and more cunningly wrought than the rest,—the foot of rare marble and chiselled bronze and the lamp above of pure gold from southern Ophir. But it was not yet kindled, for the sun was not set and the hour for the feast was not fully come.

At the upper end of the hall, before the gigantic statue of wrought gold, there was an open space, unencumbered by tables, where the smooth, polished marble floor came to view in all its rich design and colour. Two persons, entering the hall with slow steps, came to this place and stood together, looking up at the face of the golden king.

Between the two there was the gulf of a lifetime. The one was already beyond the common limit of age, while he who stood beside him was but a fair boy of fourteen summers.

The old man was erect still, and his snowy hair and beard grew like a lion's mane about his massive brow and masterful face. The deep lines of thought, graven deeper by age, followed the noble shaping of his brows in even course, and his dark eyes still shot fire, as piercing the bleared thickness of time to gaze boldly on the eternity beyond. His left hand gathered the folds of a snow-white robe around him, while in his right he grasped a straight staff of ebony and ivory, of fine workmanship, marvellously polished, whereon were wrought strange sayings in the Israëlitish manner of writing. The old man stood up to his noble height, and looked from the burnished face of the king's image to the eyes of the boy beside him, in silence, as though urging his young companion to speak for him the thoughts that filled the hearts of both.

The youth spoke not, nor gave any sign, but stood with folded hands and gazed up to the great features of Nebuchadnezzar.

He was but fourteen years of age, tall and delicately made, full of the promise of a graceful and elastic power, fine of skin, and instinct with the nervous strength of a noble and untainted race. His face was fair and white, tinged with faint colour, and his heavy golden hair fell in long curls upon his shoulders, thick and soft with the silken fineness of early youth. His delicate features were straight and noble, northern rather than Oriental in their type—supremely calm and thoughtful, almost god-like in their young restfulness. The deep blue eyes were turned upward with a touch of sadness, but the broad forehead was as marble, and the straight marking of the brows bounded it and divided it from the face. He wore the straight white tunic, edged about with fine embroideries of gold and gathered at the waist with a rich belt, while his legs were covered with wide Persian trousers wrought in

many colours of silk upon fine linen. He wore also a small cap of linen, stiffened to a point and worked with a cunning design in gold and silver. But the old man's head was covered only by the thick masses of his snowy hair, and his wide white mantle hid the details of his dress from view.

Again he glanced from the statue to his companion's eyes, and at last he spoke, in a deep smooth voice, in the Hebrew tongue.

"Nebuchadnezzar the king is gathered to his fathers, and his son also, and Nabonnedon Belshazzar reigns in his stead, yet have I endured to this day, in Babylon, these threescore and seven years, since Nebuchadnezzar the king destroyed our place upon the earth and led us away captive. Unto this day, Zoroaster, have I endured, and yet a little longer shall I stand and bear witness for Israel."

The old man's eyes flashed, and his strong aquiline features assumed an expression of intense vitality and life. Zoroaster turned to him and spoke softly, almost sadly:

"Say, O Daniel, prophet and priest of the Lord, why does the golden image seem to smile to-day? Are the times accomplished of thy vision which thou sawest in Shushan, in the palace, and is the dead king glad? I think his face was never so gentle before to look upon,—surely he rejoices at the feast, and the countenance of his image is gladdened."

"Nay, rather then should his face be sorrowful for the destruction of his seed and of his kingdom," answered the prophet somewhat scornfully. "Verily the end is at hand, and the stones of Babylon shall no longer cry out for the burden of the sins of Belshazzar, and the people call upon Bel to restore unto life the King Nebuchadnezzar; nay, or to send hither a Persian or a Mede to be a just ruler in the land."

"Hast thou read it in the stars, or have thine eyes seen these things in the visions of the night, my master?" The boy came nearer to the aged prophet and spoke in low earnest tones. But Daniel only bent his head, till his brow touched

his ebony staff, and so he remained, deep in thought.

"For I also have dreamed,"—continued Zoroaster, after a short pause,—"and my dream took hold of me, and I am sorry and full of great weariness. Now this is the manner of my dreaming." He stopped and glanced down the great nave of the hall through the open porch at the other end. The full glory of the red sun, just touching the western plain, streamed upon his face and made the tables, the preparations and the crowd of busy serving-men look like black shadows between him and the light. But Daniel leaned upon his staff and spoke no word, nor moved from his position.

"I saw in my dream," said Zoroaster, "and there was darkness; and upon the winds of the night arose the sound of war, and the cry and the clash of battle, mighty men striving one with another for the mastery and the victory, which should be to the stronger. And I saw again, and behold it was morning, and the people were

led away captive, by tens, and by hundreds, and by thousands, and the maidens also and young women into a far country. And I looked, and the face of one of the maidens was as the face of the fairest among the daughters of thy people. Then my heart yearned for her, and I would have followed after into the captivity; but darkness came upon me and I saw her no more. Therefore am I troubled and go heavily all the day."

He ceased and the cadence of the boy's voice trembled and was sad. The sun set out of sight beneath the plain, and from far off a great sound of music came in upon the evening breeze.

Daniel raised his snowy head and gazed keenly on his young companion, and there was disappointment in his look.

"Wouldst thou be a prophet?" he asked, "thou that dreamest of fair maidens and art disquieted for the love of a woman? Thinkest thou, boy, that a woman shall help thee when thou art grown to be a man, or that the word of the Lord dwelleth in vanity? Prophesy, and interpret

thy vision, if so be that thou art able to interpret it. Come, let us depart, for the king is at hand, and the night shall be given over for a space to the rioters and the mirth-makers, with whom our portion is not. Verily I also have dreamed a dream. Let us depart."

The venerable prophet stood up to his height, and grasping his staff in his right hand, began to lead the way from the hall. Zoroaster laid hold of him by the arm, as though entreating him to remain.

"Speak, master," he cried earnestly, "and declare to me thy dream, and see whether it accords with mine, and whether there shall be darkness and rumour of war in the land."

But Daniel the prophet would not stay to speak, but went out of the hall, and Zoroaster the Persian youth went with him, pondering deeply on the present and on the future, and on the nature of the vision he had seen; and made fearful by the silence of his friend and teacher.

The darkness fell upon the twilight, and within

the hall the lamps and candlesticks were kindled and gave out warm light and rare perfumes. All down the endless rows of tables, the preparations for the feast were ready; and from the gardens without, strains of music came up ever stronger and nearer, so that the winged sounds seemed to come into the vast building and hover above the tables and seats of honour, preparing the way for the guests. Nearer and nearer came the harps and the pipes and the trumpets and the heavy reed-toned bagpipes, and above all the strong rich chorus of the singers chanting high the evening hymn of praise to Bel, god of sunlight, honoured in his departing, as in his coming, with the music of the youngest and most tuneful voices in Shinar.

First came the priests of Bel, two and two, robed in their white tunics, loose white garments on their legs, the white mitre of the priestly order on their heads, and their great beards curled smooth and glossy as silk. In their midst, with stately dignity, walked their chief, his eyes upon

the ground, his hands crossed upon his breast, his face like dark marble in the twilight. On either side, those who had officiated at the sacrifice, bore the implements of their service,—the knife, the axe, the cord, and the fire in its dish; and their hands were red with the blood of the victim lately slain. Grand, great men, mighty of body and broad of brow, were these priests of Bel,—strong with the meat and the wine of the offerings that were their daily portion, and confident in the faith of their ancient wisdom.

After the priests the musicians, one hundred chosen men of skill, making strange deep harmonies in a noble and measured rhythm, marching ten and ten abreast, in ten ranks; and as they came on, the light streaming from the porch of the palace caught their silver ornaments and the strange shapes of their instruments in broken reflections between the twilight and the glare of the lamps.

Behind these came the singers,—of young boys two hundred, of youths a hundred, and of bearded

men also a hundred; the most famous of all that sang praises to Bel in the land of Assur. Ten and ten they marched, with ordered ranks and step in time to the massive beat of the long-drawn measure.

"Mighty to rule the day, great in his glory and the pride of his heat,
Shooting great bolts of light into the dark earth, turning death into life,
Making the seed to grow, strongly and fairly, high in furrow and field,
Making the heart of man glad with his gladness, rideth over the dawn
Bel, the prince, the king of kings.

"Hotly his flaming hair, streaming with brightness, and the locks of his beard
Curl'd into clouds of heat, sweeping the heavens, spread all over the sky:
Who shall abide his face, fearful and deadly, when he devours the land,

Angry with man and beast, horribly raging,
hungry for sacrifice?
Bel, the prince, the king of kings.

"Striding his three great strides, out of the
morning through the noon to the night,
Cometh he down at last, ready for feasting,
ready for sacrifice:
Then doth he tread the wine, purple and golden,
foaming deep in the west;
Shinar is spread for him, spread as a table,
Assur shall be his seat:
Bel, the prince, the king of kings.

"Bring him the fresh-slain flesh, roast it with
fire, with the savour of salt,
Pour him the strength of wine, chalice and
goblet, trodden for him alone:
Raise him the song of songs, cry out in praises,
cry out and supplicate
That he may drink delight, tasting our off'ring,
hearing our evening song:
Bel, the prince, the king of kings.

"So, in the gentle night, when he is resting,
peace descendeth on earth;
High in the firmament, where his steps led
him, gleam the tracks of his way:
Where the day felt his touch, there the night
also breaketh forth into stars,
These are the flowers of heaven, garlands of
blossoms, growing to weave his crown:
Bel, the prince, the king of kings.

"Hail! thou king of the earth, hail! Belteshazzar, hail! and for ever live!
Born of the gods on high, prince of the nations, ruling over the world:
Thou art the son of Bel, full of his glory, king over death and life;
Let all the people bow, tremble and worship, bow them down and adore
The prince of Bel, the king of kings."

As the musicians played and the singers sang, they divided their ranks and came and stood on

each side of the broad marble staircase; and the priests had done so before them, but the chief priest stood alone on the lowest step.

Then, between the files of those who stood, advanced the royal procession, like a river of gold and purple and precious stones flowing between banks of pure white. Ten and ten, a thousand lords of Babylon marched in stately throng, and in their midst rode Belshazzar the king, high upon his coal-black steed, crowned with the great tiara of white linen and gold and jewels, the golden sceptre of the kingdom in his right hand. And after the lords and the king came a long procession of litters borne by stalwart slaves, wherein reclined the fairest women of all Assyria, bidden to the great feast. Last of all, the spearmen of the guard in armour all chased with gold, their mantles embroidered with the royal cognisance, and their beards trimmed and curled in the close soldier fashion, brought up the rear; a goodly company of men of war.

As the rich voices of the singers intoned the

grand plain chant of the last stanza in the hymn, the king was in the middle of the open space at the foot of the staircase; there he drew rein and sat motionless on his horse, awaiting the end. As the ripe corn bends in its furrows to the wind, so the royal host around turned to the monarch, and fell upon their faces as the music died away at the signal of the high priest. With one consent the lords, the priests, the singers and the spearmen bowed and prostrated themselves on the ground; the bearers of the litters set down their burden while they did homage; and each of those beautiful women bent far forward, kneeling in her litter, and hid her head beneath her veil.

Only the king sat erect and motionless upon his steed, in the midst of the adoring throng. The light from the palace played strangely on his face, making the sneering smile more scornful upon his pale lips, and shading his sunken eyes with a darker shadow.

While you might count a score there was silence, and the faint evening breeze wafted the

sweet smell of the roses from the gardens to the king's nostrils, as though even the earth would bring incense of adoration to acknowledge his tremendous power.

Then the host rose again and fell back on either side while the king rode to the staircase and dismounted, leading the way to the banquet; and the high priest followed him and all the ranks of the lords and princes and the ladies of Babylon, in their beauty and magnificence, went up the marble steps and under the marble porch, spreading then like a river, about the endless tables, almost to the feet of the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar. And presently, from beneath the colonnades a sound of sweet music stole out again and filled the air; the serving-men hurried hither and thither, the black slaves plied their palm-leaf fans behind each guest, and the banquet was begun.

Surely, a most glorious feast, wherein the hearts of the courtiers waxed merry, and the dark eyes of the Assyrian women shot glances sweeter

than the sweetmeats of Egypt and stronger than the wine of the south to move the spirit of man. Even the dark king, wasted and hollow-eyed with too much pleasure-seeking, smiled and laughed,—sourly enough at first, it is true, but in time growing careless and merry by reason of his deep draughts. His hand trembled less weakly as the wine gave him back his lost strength, and more than once his fingers toyed playfully with the raven locks and the heavy earrings of the magnificent princess at his elbow. Some word of hers roused a thought in his whirling brain.

"Is not this day the feast of victories?" he cried in sudden animation; and there was silence to catch the king's words. "Is not this the day wherein my sire brought home the wealth of the Israelites, kept holy with feasting for ever? Bring me the vessels of the unbelievers' temple, that I may drink and pour out wine this night to Bel, the god of gods!"

The keeper of the treasure had anticipated the king's desire and had caused everything to be

made ready; for scarcely had Belshazzar spoken when a long train of serving-men entered the hall of the banquet and came and stood before the royal presence, their white garments and the rich vessels they bore aloft standing vividly out against the deep even red of the opposite wall.

"Let the vessels be distributed among us," cried the king,—"to every man a cup or a goblet till all are served."

And so it was done, and the royal cup-bearer came and filled the huge chalice that the king held, and the serving-men hastened to fill all the cups and the small basins; while the lords and princes laughed at the strange shapes, and eyed greedily enough the thickness and the good workmanship of the gold and silver. And so each man and each woman had a vessel from the temple of Jerusalem wherein to drink to the glory of Bel the god and of Belshazzar his prince. And when all was ready, the king took his chalice in his two hands and stood up, and all that company of courtiers stood up with him,

while a mighty strain of music burst through the perfumed air, and the serving-men showered flowers and sprinkled sweet odours on the tables.

Without stood the Angel of Death, whetting his sword upon the stones of Babylon. But Belshazzar held the chalice and spoke with a loud voice to the princes and the lords and the fair women that stood about the tables in the great hall:

"I, Belshazzar the king, standing in the hall of my fathers, do pour and drink this wine to the mighty majesty of Bel the great god, who lives for ever and ever; before whom the gods of the north and of the west and of the east and of the south are as the sand of the desert in the blast; at whose sight the vain deities of Egypt crumbled into pieces, and the God of the Israelites trembled and was made little in the days of Nebuchadnezzar my sire. And I command you, lords and princes of Babylon, you and your wives and your fair women, that ye also do pour wine and drink it, doing this homage to Bel our god, and to me, Belshazzar the king."

And so saying, he turned about to one side and spilled a few drops of wine upon the marble floor, and set the cup to his lips, facing the great throng of his guests; and he drank. But from all the banquet went up a great shout.

"Hail! king, live for ever! Hail! prince of Bel, live for ever! Hail! king of kings, live for ever!" Long and loud was the cry, ringing and surging through the pillars and up to the great carved rafters till the very walls seemed to rock and tremble with the din of the king's praise.

Slowly Belshazzar drained the cup to the dregs, while with half-closed eyes he listened to the uproar, and perhaps sneered to himself behind the chalice, as was his wont. Then he set the vessel down and looked up. But as he looked he staggered and turned pale, and would have fallen; he grasped the ivory chair behind him and stood trembling in every joint, and his knees knocking together, while his eyes seemed starting from his head, and all his face was changed and distorted with dreadful fear.

Upon the red plaster of the wall, over against the candlestick which shed its strong rays upon the fearful sight, the fingers of a vast hand moved and traced letters. Only the fingers could be seen, colossal and of dazzling brightness, and as they slowly did their work, huge characters of fire blazed out upon the dark red surface, and their lambent angry flame dazzled those who beheld, and the terror of terrors fell upon all the great throng; for they stood before Him whose shadow is immortality and death.

In a silence that could be felt, the dread hand completed its message and vanished out of sight, but the strange fire burned bright in the horrid characters of the writing that remained upon the wall.

This was the inscription in Chaldean letters:

SUTMM
IPKNN
NRLAA

Then at last the king found speech and shrieked

aloud wildly, and he commanded that they should bring in all the astrologers, the Chaldeans and the diviners, for he was in great terror and he dreaded some fearful and imminent catastrophe.

"Whoever shall read this writing," he cried, his voice changed and broken, "and declare to me the meaning of it, shall be clothed in purple, and shall have a chain of gold about his neck and shall rule as the third in the kingdom."

Amidst the mighty confusion of fear, the wise men were brought in before the king.

CHAPTER II.

In Ecbatana of Media Daniel dwelt in his extreme old age. There he built himself a tower within the sevenfold walls of the royal fortress, upon the summit of the hill, looking northward towards the forests of the mountains, and southward over the plain, and eastward to the river, and westward to Mount Zagros. His life was spent, and he was well-nigh a hundred years old. Seventeen years had passed since he had interpreted the fatal writing on the wall of the banquet-hall in Babylon in the night when Nabonnedon Belshazzar was slain, and the kingdom of the Assyrians destroyed for ever. Again and again invested with power and with the governorship of provinces, he had toiled unceasingly in the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses, and though he

was on the very boundary of possible lifetime, his brain was unclouded, and his eye keen and undimmed still. Only his grand figure was more bent and his step slower than before.

He dwelt in Ecbatana of the north, in the tower he had built for himself.[1] In the midst of the royal palaces of the stronghold he had laid the foundations duly to the north and south, and story upon story had risen, row upon row of columns, balcony upon balcony of black marble, sculptured richly from basement to turret, and so smooth and hard, that its polished corners and sides and ornaments glittered like black diamonds in the hot sun of the noonday, and cast back the moonbeams at night in a darkly brilliant reflection.

Far down below, in the gorgeous dwellings that filled the interior of the fortress, dwelt the kinsfolk of the aged prophet, and the families of the two Levites who had remained with Daniel and had chosen to follow him to his new home in Media rather than to return to Jerusalem under

[1] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book x. chap. xi. 7.

Zerubbabel, when Cyrus issued the writ for the rebuilding of the temple. There lived also in the palace Zoroaster, the Persian prince, being now in the thirty-first year of his age, and captain of the city and of the stronghold. And there, too, surrounded by her handmaidens and slaves, in a wing of the palace apart from the rest, and more beautiful for its gardens and marvellous adornment, lived Nehushta, the last of the descendants of Jehoiakim the king remaining in Media; she was the fairest of all the women in Media, of royal blood and of more than royal beauty.

She was born in that year when Babylon was overthrown, and Daniel had brought her with him to Shushan when he had quitted Assyria, and thence to Ecbatana. In the care of the prophet's kinswomen the little maid had thriven and grown fair in the stranger's land. Her soft child's eyes had lost their wondering look and had turned very proud and dark, and the long black lashes that fringed the heavy lids drooped to her cheek

when she looked down. Her features were noble and almost straight in outline, but in the slight bend at the beginning of the nose, in the wide curved nostrils, the strong full lips, and in the pale olive skin, where the blood ebbed and flowed so generously, the signs of the Jewish race were all present and unmistakable.

Nehushta, the high-born lady of Judah, was a princess in every movement, in every action, in every word she uttered. The turn of her proud head was sovereign in its expression of approval or contempt, and Zoroaster himself bowed to the simple gesture of her hand as obediently as he would have done before the Great King in all his glory. Even the venerable prophet, sitting in his lofty tower high above the city and the fortress, absorbed in the contemplation of that other life which was so very near to him, smiled tenderly and stretched out his old hands to greet Nehushta when she mounted to his chamber at sunset, attended by her maidens and her slaves. She was the youngest of all his kinsfolk—fatherless and

motherless, the last direct descendant of King Jehoiakim remaining in Media, and the aged prophet and governor cherished her and loved her for her royalty, as well as for her beauty and her kinship to himself. Assyrian in his education, Persian in his adherence to the conquering dynasty and in his long and faithful service of the Persians, Daniel was yet in his heart, as in his belief, a true son of Judah; proud of his race and tender of its young branches, as though he were himself the father of his country and the king of his people.

The last red glow of the departed day faded and sank above the black Zagros mountains to westward. The opposite sky was cold and gray, and all the green plain turned to a dull soft hue as the twilight crept over it, ever darker and more misty. In the gardens of the palace the birds in thousands sang together in chorus, as only Eastern birds do sing at sunrise and at nightfall, and their voices sounded like one strong, sweet, high chord, unbroken and drawn out.

"Come unto me, my beloved, in the warmth of the darkness, come—
Rise, and hasten thy footsteps, to be with me at night-time, come!

"I wait in the darkness for him, and the sand of the desert whirling
Is blown at the door of my tent which is open toward the desert.

"My ear in the darkness listeth for the sound of his coming nearer,
Mine eyes watch for him and rest not, for I would not he found me sleeping.

"For when my beloved cometh, he is like the beam of the morning;[1]
Ev'n as the dawn in a strange land to the sight of a man journeying.

"Yea, when my beloved cometh, as dew that descendeth from heaven,

[1] "Thou art to me as the beam of the east rising in a strange land."—*Ossian.*

No man can hear when it falleth, but as rain it refresheth all things.

"In his hand bringeth he lilies, in his right hand are many flowers,
Roses hath he on his forehead, he is crowned with roses from Shinar.

"The night-winds make sweet songs for him, even in the darkness soft music;
Whithersoever he goeth, there his sweetness goeth before him."

Her young voice died away in a soft murmuring cadence, and the nightingale alone poured out her heartful of love to the ancient moon. But as Nehushta rested immovable by the marble balustrade of the terrace, there was a rustle among the myrtles and a quick step on the pavement. The dark maiden started at the sound, and a happy smile parted her lips. But she did not turn to look; only her hand stole out behind her on the marble where she knew her lover's would

meet it. There was in the movement all the certainty of conquest and yet all the tenderness of love. The Persian trod quickly and laid his hand on hers, and bent to her, trying to meet her eyes: for one moment still she gazed out straight before her, then turned and faced him suddenly, as though she had withheld her welcome as long as she could and then given it all at once.

"I did not call you," she said, covering him with her eyes in the moonlight, but making as though she would withdraw herself a little from him, as he drew her with his hand, and with his arm, and with his eyes.

"And yet I heard you call me, my beloved," answered Zoroaster. "I heard your voice singing very sweet things in your own language—and so I came, for you did call me."

"But did you pride yourself it was for you?" laughed Nehushta. "I sang of the desert, and of tents, and of whirling sand—there is none of these things here."

"You said that your beloved brought roses in

his hand—and so I do. I will crown you with them. May I? No—I shall spoil your head-dress. Take them and do as you will with them."

"I will take them—and—I always do as I will."

"Then will to take the giver also," answered Zoroaster, letting his arm steal about her, as he half sat upon the balustrade. Nehushta looked at him again, for he was good to see, and perhaps she loved his straight calm features the better in that his face was fair, and not dark like hers.

"Methinks I have taken the giver already," she answered.

"Not yet—not all," said Zoroaster in a low voice, and a shadow of sadness crossed his noble face that looked white in the moonlight. Nehushta sighed softly and presently she laid her cheek upon his shoulder where the folding of his purple mantle made a pillow between her face and the polished golden scales of his breastplate.

"I have strange news to tell you, beloved," said Zoroaster presently. Nehushta started and

looked up, for his voice was sad. "Nay, fear not!" he continued, "there is no harm in it, I trust; but there are great changes in the kingdom, and there will be greater changes yet. The seven princes have slain Smerdis in Shushan, and Darius is chosen king, the son of Gushtasp, whom the Greeks call Hystaspes."

"He who came hither last year?" asked Nehushta quickly. "He is not fair, this new king."

"Not fair," replied the Persian, "but a brave man and a good. He has, moreover, sent for me to go to Shushan——"

"For you!" cried Nehushta, suddenly laying her two hands on Zoroaster's shoulders and gazing into his eyes. His face was to the moonlight, while hers was in the dark, and she could see every shade of expression. He smiled. "You laugh at me!" she cried indignantly. "You mock me—you are going away and you are glad!"

She would have turned away from him, but he held her two hands.

"Not alone," he answered. "The Great King

has sent an order that I shall bring to Shushan the kinsfolk of Jehoiakim, saving only Daniel, our master, for he is so old that he cannot perform the journey. The king would honour the royal seed of Judah, and to that end he sends for you, most noble and most beloved princess."

Nehushta was silent and thoughtful; her hand slipped from Zoroaster's grasp, and her eyes looked dreamily out at the river, on which the beams of the now fully-risen moon glanced, as on the scales of a silver serpent.

"Are you glad, my beloved?" asked Zoroaster. He stood with his back to the balustrade, leaning on one elbow, and his right hand played carelessly with the heavy gold tassels of his cloak. He had come up from the fortress in his armour, as he was, to bring the news to Nehushta and to Daniel; his gilded harness was on his back, half-hidden by the ample purple cloak, his sword was by his side, and on his head he wore the pointed helmet, richly inlaid with gold, bearing in front the winged wheel which the sovereigns of the

Persian empire had assumed after the conquest of Assyria. His very tall and graceful body seemed planned to combine the greatest possible strength with the most surpassing activity, and in his whole presence there breathed the consciousness of ready and elastic power, the graceful elasticity of a steel bow always bent, the inexpressible ease of motion and the matchless swiftness that men had when the world was young—that wholeness of harmonious proportion which alone makes rest graceful, and the inactivity of idleness itself like a mode of perfect motion. As they stood there together, the princess of Judah and the noble Persian, they were wholly beautiful and yet wholly contrasted—the Semite and the Aryan, the dark race of the south, on which the hot air of the desert had breathed for generations in the bondage of Egypt, and left its warm sign-manual of southern sunshine,—and the fair man of the people whose faces were already set northwards, on whom the north breathed already its icy fairness, and magnificent coldness of steely strength.

"Are you glad, my beloved?" asked Zoroaster again, looking up and laying his right hand on the princess's arm. She had given no answer to his question, but only gazed dreamily out over the river.

She seemed about to speak, then paused again, then hesitated and answered his question by another.

"Zoroaster—you love me," again she paused, and, as he passionately seized her hands and pressed his lips to them, she said softly, turning her head away, "What is love?"

He, too, waited one moment before he answered, and, standing to his lordly height, took her head between his hands and pressed it to his breast; then, with one arm around her, he stood looking eastward and spoke:

"Listen, my beloved, and I, who love you, will tell you what love is. In the far-off dawn of the soul-life, in the ethereal distance of the outer firmament, in the mist of the star-dust, our spirits were quickened with the spirit of God, and found

one another, and met. Before earth was for us, we were one; before time was for us, we were one—even as we shall be one when there is no time for us any more. Then Ahura Mazda, the All-Wise God, took our two souls from among the stars, and set them in the earth, clothed for a time with mortal bodies. But we know each other, that we were together from the first, although these earthly things obscure our immortal vision, and we see each other less clearly. Yet is our love none the less—rather, it seems every day greater, for our bodies can feel joy and sorrow, even as our spirits do; so that I am able to suffer for you, in which I rejoice, and I would that I might be chosen to lay down my life for you, that you might know how I love you; for often you doubt me, and sometimes you doubt yourself. There should be no doubt in love. Love is from the first, and will be to the end, and beyond the end; love is so eternal, so great, so whole, that this mortal life of ours is but as a tiny instant, a moment of pausing in our journey from one

star-world to another along the endless paths of heavenly glory we shall tread together—it is nothing, this worldly life of ours. Before it shall seem long that we have loved, this earth we stand on, these things we touch, these bodies of ours that we think so strong and fair, will be forgotten and dissolved into their elements in the trackless and undiscoverable waste of past mortality, while we ourselves are ever young, and ever fair, and for ever living in our immortal love."

Nehushta looked up wonderingly into her lover's eyes, then let her head rest on his shoulder. The high daring of his thoughts seemed ever trying to scale heaven itself, seeking to draw her to some wondrous region of mystic beauty and strange spirit life. She was awed for a moment, then she, too, spoke in her own fashion.

"I love life," she said, "I love you because you live, not because you are a spirit chained and tied down for a time. I love this soft sweet earth, the dawn of it, and the twilight of it; I love the sun in his rising and in his setting; I

love the moon in her fulness and in her waning; I love the smell of the box and of the myrtle, of the roses and of the violets; I love the glorious light of day, the splendour of heat and greenness, the song of the birds of the air and the song of the labourer in the field, the hum of the locust, and the soft buzzing of the bee; I love the brightness of gold and the richness of fine purple, the tramp of your splendid guards and the ring of their trumpets clanging in the fresh morning, as they march through the marble courts of the palace. I love the gloom of night for its softness, the song of the nightingale in the ivory moonlight, the rustle of the breeze in the dark rose-thickets, and the odour of the sleeping flowers in my gardens; I love even the cry of the owl from the prophet's tower, and the soft thick sound of the bat's wings, as he flits past the netting of my window. I love it all, for the whole earth is rich and young and good to touch, and most sweet to live in. And I love you because you are more beautiful than other men, fairer and stronger and

braver, and because you love me, and will let no other love me but yourself, if you were to die for it. Ah, my beloved, I would that I had all the sweet voices of the earth, all the tuneful tongues of the air, to tell you how I love you!"

"There is no lack of sweetness, nor of eloquence, my princess," said Zoroaster; "there is no need of any voice sweeter than yours, nor of any tongue more tuneful. You love in your way, I in mine; the two together must surely be the perfect whole. Is it not so? Nay—seal the deed once again—and again—so! 'Love is stronger than death,' says your preacher."

"'And jealousy is as cruel as the grave,' he says, too," added Nehushta, her eyes flashing fire as her lips met his. "You must never make me jealous, Zoroaster, never, never! I would be so cruel—you cannot dream how cruel I would be!"

Zoroaster laughed under his silken beard, a

deep, joyous, ringing laugh that startled the moonlit stillness.

"By Nabon and Bel, there is small cause for your jealousy here," he said.

"Swear not by your false gods!" laughed Nehushta. "You know not how little it would need to rouse me."

"I will not give you that little," answered the Persian. "And as for the false gods, they are well enough for a man to swear by in these days. But I will swear by any one you command me, or by anything!"

"Swear not, or you will say again that the oath has need of sealing," replied Nehushta, drawing her mantle around her, so as to cover half her face. "Tell me, when are we to begin our journey? We have talked much and have said little, as it ever is. Shall we go at once, or are we to wait for another order? Is Darius safe upon the throne? Who is to be chiefest at the court—one of the seven princes, I suppose, or his old father? Come, do you know anything of all these

changes? Why have you never told me what was going to happen—you who are high in power and know everything?"

"Your questions flock upon me like doves to a maiden who feeds them from her hand," said Zoroaster, with a smile, "and I know not which shall be fed first. As for the king, I know that he will be great, and will hold securely the throne, for he has already the love of the people from the Western sea to the wild Eastern mountains. But it seemed as though the seven princes would have divided the empire amongst them, until this news came. I think he will more likely take one of your people for his close friend than trust to the princes. As for our journey, we must depart betimes, or the king will have gone before us from Shushan to Stakhar in the south, where they say he will build himself a royal dwelling and stay in the coming winter time. Prepare yourself for the journey, therefore, my princess, lest anything be forgotten and you should be deprived of what you need for any time."

"I am never deprived of what I need," said Nehushta, half in pride and half in jest.

"Nor I, when I am with my beloved!" answered the Persian. "And now the moon is high, and I must bear this news to our master, the prophet."

"So soon?" said Nehushta reproachfully, and she turned her head away.

"I would there were no partings, my beloved, even for the space of an hour," answered Zoroaster, tenderly drawing her to him; but she resisted a little and would not look at him.

"Farewell now—good-night, my princess—light of my soul;" he kissed her dark cheek passionately. "Good-night!"

He trod swiftly across the terrace.

"Zoroaster! prince!" Nehushta called aloud, but without turning. He came back. She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him almost desperately. Then she pushed him gently away from her.

"Go—my love—only that," she murmured,

and he left her standing by the marble balustrade, while the yellow moon turned slowly pale as she rose in the heavens, and the song of the lorn nightingale re-echoed in the still night, from the gardens to the towers, in long sweet cries of burning love, and soft, complaining, silvery notes of mingled sorrow and joy.

CHAPTER III.

In the prophet's chamber, also, the moonbeams fell upon the marble floor; but a seven-beaked Hebrew lamp of bronze shed a warmer light around, soft and mellow, yet strong enough to illuminate the scroll that lay open upon the old man's knee. His brows were knit together, and the furrows on his face were shaded deeply by the high light, as he sat propped among many cushions and wrapped in his ample purple cloak that was thickly lined with fur and drawn together over his snowy beard; for the years of his life were nearly accomplished, and the warmth of his body was even then leaving him.

Zoroaster raised the heavy curtain of carpet that hung before the low square door, and came and bowed himself before the teacher of his youth

and the friend of his manhood. The prophet looked up keenly, and something like a smile crossed his stern features as his eyes rested on the young officer in his magnificent armour; Zoroaster held his helmet in his hand, and his fair hair fell like a glory to his shoulders, mingling with his silky beard upon his breastplate. His dark blue eyes met his master's fearlessly.

"Hail! and live for ever, chosen of the Lord!" he said in salutation. "I bring tidings of great moment and importance. If it be thy pleasure, I will speak; but if not, I will come at another season."

"Sit upon my right hand, Zoroaster, and tell me all that thou hast to tell. Art thou not my beloved son, whom the Lord hath given me to comfort mine old age?"

"I am thy servant and the servant of thine house, my father," answered Zoroaster, seating himself upon a carved chair at a little distance from the prophet.

"Speak, my son,—what tidings hast thou?"

"There is a messenger come in haste from Shushan, bearing tidings and letters. The seven princes have slain Smerdis in his house, and have chosen Darius the son of Gushtasp to be king."

"Praise be to the Lord who hath chosen a just man!" exclaimed the prophet devoutly. "So may good come out of evil, and salvation by the shedding of blood."

"Even so, my master," answered Zoroaster. "It is also written that Darius, may he live for ever, will establish himself very surely upon the throne of the Medes and Persians. There are letters by the hand of the same messenger, sealed with the signet of the Great King, wherein I am bidden to bring the kinsfolk of Jehoiakim, who was king over Judah, to Shushan without delay, that the Great King may do them honour as is meet and right; but what that honour may be that he would do to them, I know not."

"What is this that thou sayest?" asked Daniel, starting forward from his reclining position, and fixing his dark eyes on Zoroaster. "Will the

king take away from me the children of my old age? Art not thou as my son? And is not Nehushta as my daughter? As for the rest, I care not if they go. But Nehushta is as the apple of my eye! She is as a fair flower growing in the desert of my years! What is this that the king hath done to me? Whither will he take her from me?"

"Let not my lord be troubled," said Zoroaster, earnestly, for he was moved by the sudden grief of the prophet. "Let not my lord be troubled. It is but for a space, for a few weeks; and thy kinsfolk will be with thee again, and I also."

"A space, a few weeks! What is a space to thee, child, or a week that thou shouldest regard it? But I am old and full of years. It may be, if now thou takest my daughter Nehushta from me, that I shall see her face no more, neither thine, before I go hence and return not. Go to! Thou art young, but I am now nigh unto a hundred years old."

"Nevertheless, if it be the will of the Great

King, I must accomplish this thing," answered the young man. "But I will swear by thy head and by mine that there shall no harm happen to the young princess; and if anything happen to her that is evil, may the Lord do so to me and more also. Behold, I have sworn; let not my lord be troubled any more."

But the prophet bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. Aged and childless, Zoroaster and Nehushta were to him children, and he loved them with his whole soul. Moreover, he knew the Persian court, and he knew that if once they were taken into the whirl and eddy of its intrigue and stirring life, they would not return to Ecbatana; or returning, they would be changed and seem no more the same. He was bitterly grieved and hurt at the thought of such a separation, and in the grand simplicity of his greatness he felt no shame at shedding tears for them. Zoroaster himself, in the pride of his brilliant youth, was overcome with pain at the thought of quitting the sage who had been a

father to him for thirty years. He had never been separated from Daniel save for a few months at a time during the wars of Cambyses; at six-and-twenty years of age he had been appointed to the high position of captain of the fortress of Ecbatana; since which time he had enjoyed the closest intercourse with the prophet, his master.

Zoroaster was a soldier by force of circumstances, and he wore his gorgeous arms with matchless grace, but there were two things that, with him, went before his military profession, and completely eclipsed it in importance.

From his earliest youth he had been the pupil of Daniel, who had inspired him with his own love of the mystic lore to which the prophet owed so much of his singular success in the service of the Assyrian and Persian monarchs. The boy's poetical mind, strengthened and developed by the study of the art of reasoning, and of the profound mathematical knowledge of the Chaldean astronomers, easily grasped the highest subjects, and showed from the first a capacity and lucidity

that delighted his master. To attain by a life of rigid ascetic practice to the intuitive comprehension of knowledge, to the understanding of natural laws not discernible to the senses alone, and to the merging of the soul and higher intelligence in the one universal and divine essence, were the objects Daniel proposed to his willing pupil. The noble boy, by his very nature, scorned and despised the pleasures of sense, and yearned ever for the realising of an ideal wherein a sublime wisdom of transcendent things should direct a sublime courage in things earthly to the doing of great deeds.

Year after year the young Persian grew up in the splendid surroundings of the court, distinguished before all those of his age for his courage and fearless honesty, for his marvellous beauty, and for his profound understanding of all subjects, great and small, that came within the sphere of his activity; most of all remarkable, perhaps, for the fact that he cared nothing for the society of women, and had never been known to love any

woman. He was a favourite with Cyrus; and even Cambyses, steeped in degrading vice, and surrounded by flatterers, panderers, and priests of the Magians, from the time when he began to suspect his brother, the real Smerdis, of designs upon the throne, recognised the exceptional merits and gifts of the young noble, and promoted him to his position in Ecbatana, at the time when he permitted Daniel to build his great tower in that ancient fortress. The dissipated king may have understood that the presence of such men as Daniel and Zoroaster would be of greater advantage in an outlying district where justice and moderation would have a good effect upon the population, than in his immediate neighbourhood, where the purity and temperance of their lives contrasted too strongly with the degrading spectacle his own vices afforded to the court.

Here, in the splendid retirement of a royal palace, the prophet had given himself up completely to the contemplation of those subjects which, through all his life, had engrossed his

leisure time, and of which the knowledge had so directly contributed to his singular career; and in the many hours of leisure which Zoroaster's position allowed him, Daniel sought to bring the intelligence of the soldier-philosopher to the perfection of its final development. Living, as he did, entirely in his tower, save when, at rare intervals, he caused himself to be carried down to the gardens, the prophet knew little of what went on in the palace below, so that he sometimes marvelled that his pupil's attention wandered, and that his language betrayed occasionally a keener interest in his future, and in the possible vicissitudes of his military life, than he had formerly been wont to show.

For a new element had entered into the current of Zoroaster's thoughts. For years he had seen the lovely child Nehushta growing up. As a boy of twenty summers he had rocked her on his knee; later he had taught her and played with her, and seen the little child turn to the slender girl, haughty and royal in her young ways, and

dominating her playfellows as a little lioness might rule a herd of tamer creatures; and at last her sixteenth year had brought with it the bloom of early southern womanhood, and Zoroaster, laughing with her among the roses in the gardens, on a summer's day, had felt his heart leap and sink within him, and his own fair cheek grow hot and cold for the ring of her voice and the touch of her soft hand.

He who knew so much of mankind, who had lived so long at the court, and had coldly studied every stage of human nature, where unbridled human nature ever ruled the hour, knew what he felt; and it was as though he had received a sharp wound that thrust him through, body and heart and soul, and cleft his cold pride in two. For days he wandered beneath the pines and the rhododendron trees alone, lamenting for the fabric of mighty philosophy he had built himself, in which no woman was ever to set foot; and which a woman's hand, a woman's eyes had shattered in a day. It seemed as if his whole life were

blasted and destroyed, so that he was become even as other men, to suffer love and eat his heart out for a girl's fair word. He would have escaped from meeting the dark young princess again; but one evening, as he stood alone upon the terrace of the gardens, sorrowing for the change in himself, she found him, and there they looked into each other's eyes and saw a new light, and loved each other fiercely from that day, as only the untainted children of godlike races could love. But neither of them dared to tell the prophet, nor to let those of the palace know that they had pledged each other their troth, down there upon the moonlit terrace, behind the myrtles. Instinctively they dreaded lest the knowledge of their love should raise a storm of anger in Daniel's breast at the idea that his chosen philosopher should abandon the paths of mystic learning and reduce himself to the level of common mankind by marriage; and Zoroaster guessed how painful to the true Israelite would be the thought that a daughter and a princess of Judah

should be united in wedlock with one who, however noble and true and wise, was, after all, a stranger and an unbeliever. For Zoroaster, while devoting himself heart and soul to the study of Daniel's philosophy, and of the wisdom the latter had acquired from the Chaldeans, had nevertheless firmly maintained his independence of thought. He was not an Israelite, nor would he ever wish to become one; but he was not an idolater nor a Magian, nor a follower of Gomata, the half-Indian Brahmin, who had endeavoured to pass himself off as Smerdis the son of Cyrus.

Either of these causes alone would have sufficed to raise a serious obstacle to the marriage. Together they seemed insurmountable. During the disorder and anarchy that prevailed in the seven months of the reign of Pseudo-Smerdis, it would have been madness to have married, trusting to the favour of the wretched semi-monarch for fortune and advancement; nor could Nehushta have married and maintained her state as a princess of Judah without the consent of Daniel, who was

her guardian, and whose influence was paramount in Media, and very great even at court. Zoroaster was therefore driven to conceal his passion as best he could, trusting to the turn of future events for the accomplishment of his dearest wish. In the meanwhile, he and the princess met daily in public, and Zoroaster's position as captain of the fortress gave him numerous opportunities of meeting Nehushta in the solitude of the gardens, which were jealously guarded and set apart exclusively for the use of Nehushta and her household.

But now that the moment had come when it seemed as though a change were to take place in the destinies of the lovers, they felt constrained. Beyond a few simple questions and answers, they had not discussed the matter of the journey when they were together; for Nehushta was so much surprised and delighted at the idea of again seeing the magnificence of the court at Shushan, which she so well remembered from the period of her childhood, that she feared to let Zoroaster see

how glad she was to leave Ecbatana, which, but for him, would have been to her little better than a prison. He, on the contrary, thinking that he foresaw an immediate removal of all obstacle and delay through the favour of Darius, was, nevertheless, too gentle and delicate of tact to bring suddenly before Nehushta's mind the prospect of marrying which presented itself so vividly to his own fancy. But he felt no less disturbed in his heart when face to face with the old prophet's sorrow at losing his foster-daughter; and, for the first time in his life, he felt guilty when he reflected that Daniel was grieved at his own departure almost as deeply as on account of Nehushta. He experienced what is so common with persons of cold and even temperament when brought into close relation with more expansive and affectionate natures; he was overcome with the sense that his old master gave him more love and more thought than he could possibly give in return, and that he was therefore ungrateful; and the knowledge he alone possessed, that he surely

intended to marry the princess in spite of the prophet, and by the help of the king, added painfully to his mental suffering.

The silence lasted some minutes, till the old man suddenly lifted his head and leaned back among his cushions, gazing at his companion's face.

"Hast thou no sorrow, nor any regret?" he asked sadly.

"Nay, my lord doth me injustice," answered Zoroaster, his brows contracting in his perplexity. "I should be ungrateful if I repented not leaving thee even for the space of a day. But let my lord be comforted; this parting is not for long, and before the flocks come down from Zagros to take shelter from the winter, we will be with thee."

"Swear to me, then, that thou wilt return before the winter," insisted the prophet half-scornfully.

"I cannot swear," answered Zoroaster. "Behold, I am in the hands of the Great King. I cannot swear."

"Say rather that thou art in the hand of the Lord, and that therefore thou canst not swear. For I say thou wilt not return, and I shall see thy face no more. The winter cometh, and the birds of the air fly towards the south, and I am alone in the land of snow and frost; and the spring cometh also, and I am yet alone, and my time is at hand; for thou comest not any more, neither my daughter Nehushta, neither any of my kinsfolk. And behold, I go down to the grave alone."

The yellow light of the hanging lamp above shone upon the old man's eyes, and there was a dull fire in them. His face was drawn and haggard, and every line and furrow traced by the struggles of his hundred years stood out dark and rugged and tremendous in power. Zoroaster shuddered as he looked on him, and, though he would have spoken, he was awed to silence.

"Go forth, my son," cried the prophet in deep tones, and as he spoke he slowly raised his body till he sat rigidly erect, and his wan and ancient

fingers were stretched out towards the young soldier. "Go forth and do thy part, for thou art in the hand of the Lord, and some things that thou wilt do shall be good, and some things evil. For thou hast departed from the path of crystal that leadeth among the stars, and thou hast fallen away from the ladder whereby the angels ascend and descend upon the earth, and thou art gone after the love of a woman which endureth not. And for a season thou shalt be led astray, and for a time thou shalt suffer great things; and after a time thou shalt return into the way; and again a time, and thou shalt perish in thine own imaginations, because thou hast not known the darkness from the light, nor the good from the evil. By a woman shalt thou go astray, and from a woman shalt thou return; yet thou shalt perish. But because there is some good in thee, it shall endure, and thy name also, for generations; and though the evil that besetteth thee shall undo thee, yet at the last thy soul shall live."

Zoroaster buried his face in his hands, over-

come by the majesty of the mighty prophet and by the terror of his words.

"Rise and go forth, for the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and no man can hinder that thou doest. Thou shalt look upon the sun and shalt delight in him; and again thou shalt look and the light of the air shall be as darkness. Thou shalt boast in thy strength and in thine armour that there is none like thee, and again thou shalt cast thy glory from thee and say, 'This also is vanity.' The king delighteth in thee, and thou shalt stand before the queen in armour of gold and in fine raiment; and the end is near, for the hand of the Lord is upon thee. If the Lord will work great things by thee, what is that to me? Go forth quickly, and rest not by the way, lest the woman tempt thee and thou perish. And as for me, I go also—not with thee, but before thee. See that thou follow after—for I go. Yea, I see even now light in the darkness of the world, and the glory of the triumph of heaven is over me, triumphing greatly in the majesty of light."

Zoroaster looked up and fell to the ground upon his knees in wonder and amazement at Daniel's feet, while his heavy helmet rolled clanging on the marble pavement. The prophet stood erect as a giant oak, stretching his withered hands to heaven, all the mass of his snow-white hair and beard falling about him to his waist. His face was illuminated as from within with a strange light, and his dark eyes turned upward seemed to receive and absorb the brightness of an open heaven. His voice rang again with the strength of youth, and his whole figure was clothed as with the majesty of another world. Again he spoke:

"Behold, the voice of the ages is in me, and the Lord my God hath taken me up. My days are ended; I am taken up and shall no more be cast down. The earth departeth and the glory of the Lord is come which hath no end for ever.

"The Lord cometh—He cometh quickly. In His right hand are the ages, and the days and the nights are under His feet. The ranks of the

Cherubim are beside Him, and the armies of the Seraphim are dreadful. The stars of heaven tremble, and the voice of their moaning is as the voice of the uttermost fear. The arch of the outer firmament is shivered like a broken bow, and the curtain of the sky is rent in pieces as a veil in the tempest. The sun and the moon shriek aloud, and the sea crieth horribly before the Lord.

"The nations are extinct as the ashes of a fire that is gone out, and the princes of the earth are no more. He hath bruised the earth in a mortar, and the dust of it is scattered abroad in the heavens. The stars in their might hath He pounded to pieces, and the foundations of the ages to fine powder. There is nothing of them left, and their voices are dead. There are dim shapes in the horror of emptiness.

"But out of the north ariseth a fair glory with brightness, and the breath of the Lord breatheth life into all things. The beam of the dawn is risen, and there shall again be times and seasons,

and the Being of the majesty of God is made manifest in form. From the dust of the earth is the earth made again, and of the beams of His glory shall He make new stars.

"Send up the voices of praise, O ye things that are; Cry out in exultation with mighty music! Praise the Lord in whom is Life, and in whom all things have Being! Praise Him and glorify Him that is risen with the wings of the morning of heaven; in whose breath the stars breathe, in whose brightness also the firmament is lightened! Praise Him who maketh the wheels of the spheres to run their courses; who maketh the flowers to bloom in the spring, and the little flowers of the field to give forth their sweetness! Praise Him, winter and summer; praise Him, cold and heat! Praise Him, stars of heaven; praise Him, men and women in the earth! Praise and glory and honour be unto the Most High Jehovah, who sitteth upon the Throne for ever, and ever, and ever . . ."

The prophet's voice rang out with tremendous

force and majestic clearness as he uttered the last words. Throwing up his arms to their height, he stood one moment longer, immovable, his face radiantly illuminated with an unearthly glory. One instant he stood there, and then fell back, straight and rigid, to his length upon the cushioned floor—dead!

Zoroaster started to his feet in amazement and horror, and stood staring at the body of his master and friend lying stiff and stark beneath the yellow light of the hanging lamp. Then suddenly he sprang forward and kneeled again beside the pale noble head that looked so grand in death. He took one of the hands and chafed it, he listened for the beating of the heart that beat no more, and sought for the stirring of the least faint breath of lingering life. But he sought in vain; and there, in the upper chamber of the tower, the young warrior fell upon his face and wept alone by the side of the mighty dead.

CHAPTER IV.

THUS died Daniel, and for seven days the women sat apart upon the ground and mourned him, while the men embalmed his body and made it ready for burial. They wrapped him in much fine linen and poured out very precious spices and ointments from the storehouses of the palaces. Round about his body they burned frankincense and myrrh and amber, and the gums of the Indian benzoe and of the Persian fir, and great candles of pure wax; for all the seven days the mourners from the city made a great mourning, ceasing not to sing the praises of the prophet and to cry aloud by day and night that the best and the worthiest and the greatest of all men was dead.

Thus they watched and mourned and sang his

great deeds. And in the lower chamber of the tower the women sat upon the floor, with Nehushta in their midst, and sorrowed greatly, fasting and mourning in raiment of sackcloth, and strewing ashes upon the floor and upon themselves. Nehushta's face grew thin and very pale and her lips white in that time, and she let her heavy hair hang neglected about her. Many of the men shaved their heads and went barefooted, and the fortress and the palaces were filled with the sound of weeping and grief. The Hebrews who were there mourned their chief, and the two Levites sat beside the dead man and read long chapters from their scriptures. The Medes mourned their great and just governor, under the Assyrian name of Belteshazzar, given first to Daniel by Nebuchadnezzar; and from all the town the noise of their weeping and mourning came up, like the mighty groan of a nation, to the ears of those that dwelt in the fortress and the palace.

On the eighth day they buried him, with pomp

and state, in a tomb in the garden which they had built during the week of mourning. The two Levites and a young Hebrew and Zoroaster himself, clad in sackcloth and barefooted, raised up the prophet's body upon a bier and bore him upon their shoulders down the broad staircase of the tower and out into the garden to his tomb. The mourners went before, many hundreds of Median women with dishevelled hair, rending their dresses of sackcloth and scattering ashes upon their path and upon their heads, crying aloud in wild voices of grief and piercing the air with their screams, till they came to the tomb and stood round about it while the four men laid their master in his great coffin of black marble beneath the pines and the rhododendrons. . And the pipers followed after, making shrill and dreadful music that sounded as though some supernatural beings added their voices to the universal wail of woe. And on either side of the body walked the women, the prophet's kinsfolk; but Nehushta walked by Zoroaster, and ever and anon,

as the funeral procession wound through the myrtle walks of the deep gardens, her dark and heavy eyes stole a glance sidelong at her strong fair lover. His face was white as death and set sternly before him, and his dishevelled hair and golden beard flowed wildly over the rough coarseness of his long sackcloth garments. But his step never faltered, though he walked barefooted upon the hard gravel, and from the upper chamber of the tower whence they bore the corpse to the very moment when they laid it in the tomb, his face never changed, neither looked he to the right nor to the left. And then, at last, when they had lowered their beloved master with linen bands to his last resting-place, and the women came near with boxes of nard and ambergris and precious ointments, Zoroaster looked long and fixedly at the swathed head, and the tears rolled down his cheeks and dropped upon his beard and upon the marble of the coffin; till at last he turned in silence, and went away through the multitude that parted before him, as pale as the

dead and answering no man's greeting, nor even glancing at Nehushta who had stood at his elbow. And he went away and hid himself for the rest of that day.

But in the evening, when the sun was gone down, he came and stood upon the terrace in the darkness, for there was no moon. He wore again his arms, and his purple cloak was about him, for he had his duty to perform in visiting the fortress. The starlight glimmered faintly on his polished helmet and duskily made visible his marble features and his beard. He stood with his back to the pillars of the balustrade, looking towards the myrtles of the garden, for he knew that Nehushta would come to the wonted tryst. He waited long, but at last he heard a step upon the gravel path and the rustle of the myrtles, and presently in the faint light he could see the white skirt of her garment beneath the dark mantle moving swiftly towards him. He sprang forward to meet her and would have taken her in his arms, but she put him back and looked

away from him while she walked slowly to the front of the terrace. Even in the gloom of the starlight Zoroaster could see that something had offended her, and a cold weight seemed to fall upon his breast and chilled the rising words of loving greeting.

Zoroaster followed her and laid his hand upon her shoulder. Unresponsive, she allowed it to remain there.

"My beloved," he said at last, trying in vain to look into her averted face, "have you no word for me to-night?" Still she answered nothing. "Has your sorrow made you forget our love?" he murmured close to her ear. She started back from him a little and looked at him. Even in the dusk he could see her eyes flash as she answered:

"Had not your own sorrow so utterly got the mastery over you to-day that you even refused to look at me?" she asked. "In all that long hour when we were so near together, did you give me one glance? You had forgotten me in

the extremity of your grief!" she cried scornfully. "And now that the first torrent of your tears has dwindled to a little stream, you have time to remember me! I thank my lord for the notice he deigns to give his handmaiden, but—I need it not. Well—why are you here?"

Zoroaster stood up to his height and folded his arms deliberately, facing Nehushta, and he spoke calmly, though there was in his voice the dulness of a great and sudden pain. He knew men well enough, but he knew little of women.

"There is a time to be sorrowful and a time for joy," he said. "There is a time for weeping and a time for the glances of love. I did as I did, because when a man has a great grief for one dead and when he desires to show his sorrow in doing honour to one who has been as a father to him, it is not meet that other thoughts should be in his mind; not even those thoughts which are most dear to him and nearest to his heart. Therefore I looked not at you when we were burying our master, and though I love you and

in my heart look ever on your face, yet to-day my eyes were turned from you and I saw you not. Wherefore are you angry with me?"

"I am not angry," said Nehushta, "but think you love me little that you turn from me so easily." She looked down, and her face was quite hidden in the dark shadow. Then Zoroaster put his arm about her neck and drew her to him, and, though she resisted a little, in a moment her head rested on his breast. Then she struggled again.

"Nay, let me go, for you do not love me!" she said, half in a whisper. But he held her close.

"Nay, but you shall not go, for I do love you," he answered tenderly.

"Shall not?" cried she, turning in his arms, half fiercely; then her voice sank and thrilled softly. "Say that I will not," she murmured, and her arms went round him and pressed him passionately to her. "Oh, my beloved, why do you ever seem so cold? so cold—when I so love you?"

"I am not cold," he said fondly, "and I love you beyond all power of words to tell. Said we not that you had your way and I mine? Who shall tell us which is the sweeter music when both unite in so grand a harmony? Only doubt not, for doubting is as the drop that falls from the eaves upon the marble corner-stone, and, by ever falling, wears furrows in the stone that the whole ocean could not soften."

"I will not doubt any more," said Nehushta suddenly, "only—can you not love me a little sometimes in the way I do you? It is so sweet, —my way of loving."

"Indeed I will try, for it is very sweet," answered Zoroaster, and, bending down, he kissed her lips. Far off from the tower the melancholy cry of an owl echoed sadly across the gardens, and a cool damp breeze sprang up suddenly from the east. Nehushta shuddered slightly, and drew her cloak about her.

"Let us walk upon the terrace," she said, "it is cold to-night—is not this the last night here?"

"Yes; to-morrow we must go hence upon our journey. This is the last night."

Nehushta drew closer to her lover as they paced the terrace together, and each wound one arm about the other. For some minutes they walked in silence, each perhaps recalling the many meetings upon that very terrace since the first time their lips met in love under the ivory moonlight of the month Tammuz, more than a year ago. At last Nehushta spoke.

"Know you this new king?" she asked. "I saw him but for a few moments last year. He was a young prince, but he is not fair."

"A young prince with an old man's head upon his shoulders," answered Zoroaster. "He is a year younger than I—but I would not have his battles to fight; nor, if I had, would I have taken Atossa to be my wife."

"Atossa?" repeated Nehushta.

"Yes. The king has already married her—she was the wife of Cambyses, and also of the false Smerdis, the Magian, whom Darius has slain."

"Is she fair? Have I not seen her?" asked Nehushta quickly.

"Indeed, you must have seen her at the court in Shushan, before we came to Ecbatana. She was just married to Cambyses then, but he regarded her little, for he was ever oppressed with wine and feasting. But you were a child then, and were mostly with the women of your house, and you may not have seen her."

"Tell me—had she not blue eyes and yellow hair? Had she not a cruel face—very cold?"

"Aye, it may be that she had a hard look. I remember that her eyes were blue. She was very unhappy; therefore she helped the Magian. It was not she that betrayed him."

"You pitied her even then, did you not?" asked Nehushta.

"Yes—she deserved pity."

"She will have her revenge now. A woman with a face like hers loves revenge."

"Then she will deserve pity no longer," said Zoroaster, with a slight laugh.

"I hate her!" said the princess, between her teeth.

"Hate her? How can you hate a woman you have never more than seen, and she has done you no evil in the world?"

"I am sure I shall hate her," answered Nehushta. "She is not at all beautiful—only cold and white and cruel. How could the Great King be so foolish as to marry her?"

"May he live for ever! He marries whom he pleases. But I pray you, do not begin by hating the queen overmuch."

"Why not? What have I to gain from the queen?" asked the princess. "Am I not of royal blood as well as she?"

"That is true," returned Zoroaster. "Nevertheless there is a prudence for princesses as well as for other people."

"I would not be afraid of the Great King himself with you beside me," said Nehushta proudly. "But I will be prudent to please you. Only—I am sure I shall hate her."

Zoroaster smiled to himself in the dusk, but he would not have had the princess see he was amused.

"It shall be as you please," he said; "we shall soon know how it will end, for we must begin our journey to-morrow."

"It will need three weeks, will it not?" asked Nehushta.

"Yes—it is at least one hundred and fifty farsangs. It would weary you to travel more than seven or eight farsangs in a day's journey—indeed, that is a long distance for any one."

"We shall always be together, shall we not?" asked the princess.

"I will ride beside your litter, my beloved," said Zoroaster. "But it will be very tedious for you, and you will often be tired. The country is very wild in some parts, and we must trust to what we can take with us for our comfort. Do not spare the mules therefore, but take everything you need."

"Besides, we may not return," said Nehushta thoughtfully.

Her companion was silent. "Do you think we shall ever come back?" she asked presently.

"I have dreamed of coming back," answered Zoroaster; "but I fear it is to be even as you say."

"Why say you that you fear it? Is it not better to live at the court than here in this distant fortress, so shut off from the world that we might almost as well be among the Scythians? Oh, I long for the palace at Shushan! I am sure it will seem tenfold more beautiful now than it did when I was a child."

Zoroaster sighed. In his heart he knew there was to be no returning to Media, and yet he had dreamed of marrying the princess and being made governor of the province, and bringing his wife home to this beautiful land to live out a long life of quiet happiness. But he knew it was not to be; and though he tried hard to shake off the impression, he felt in his inmost self that the words of the dying prophet foretold truly what would happen to him. Only he

hoped that there was an escape, and the passion in his heart scorned the idea that in loving Nehushta he was being led astray, or made to abandon the right path.

The cold breeze blew steadily from the east, with a chill dampness in it, sighing wearily among the trees. The summer was not yet wholly come, and the after-breath of the winter still made itself felt from time to time. The lovers parted, taking leave of the spot they loved so well,—Zoroaster with a heavy foreboding of evil to come; Nehushta with a great longing for the morrow, a mad desire to be on the way to Shushan.

Something in her way of speaking had given Zoroaster a sense of pain. Her interest in the court and in the Great King, the strange capricious hatred that seemed already forming in her breast against Atossa, the evident desire she betrayed to take part in the brilliant life of the capital,—indeed, her whole manner troubled him. It seemed so unaccountable that she should be

angry with him for his conduct at the burial of the prophet, that he almost thought she had wished to take advantage of a trifle for the sake of annoying him. He felt that doubt which never comes so suddenly and wounds so keenly as when a man feels the most certain of his position and of himself.

He retired to his apartment in the palace with a burden of unhappiness and evil presentiment that was new to him. It was very different from the sincere sorrow he had felt and still suffered for the death of his master and friend. That misfortune had not affected him as regarded Nehushta. But now he had been separated from her during all the week by the exigencies of the funeral ceremonies, and he had looked forward to meeting her this evening as to a great joy after so much mourning, and he was disappointed. She had affected to be offended with him, yet his reason told him that he had acted naturally and rightly. Could he, the bearer of the prophet's body, the captain of all the fortress, the man of

all others on whom all eyes were turned, have exchanged love glances or spoken soft words to the princess by his side at such a time? It was absurd; she had no right to expect such a thing.

However, he reflected that a new kind of life was to begin on the morrow. For the best part of a month he would ride by her litter all day long, and sit at her table at noonday and evening; he would watch over her and take care of her, and see that her slightest wants were instantly supplied; a thousand incidents would occur whereby he might re-establish all the loving intimacy which seemed to have been so unexpectedly shaken. And so, consoling himself with the hopes of the future, and striving to overlook the present, he fell asleep, wearied with the fatigues and sorrows of the day.

But Nehushta lay all night upon her silken cushions, and watched the flickering little lamp and the strange shadows it cast among the rich, painted carvings of the ceiling. She slept little,

but waking she dreamed of the gold and the glitter of Shushan, of the magnificence of the young king, and of the brilliant hard-featured beauty of Atossa, whom she already hated or had determined to hate. The king interested her most. She tried to recall his features and manner as he had appeared when he tarried one night in the fortress a year previous. She remembered a black-browed man in the prime of youth, with heavy brows and an eagle nose; his young beard growing black and square about his strong dark features, which would have seemed coarse saving for his bright eyes that looked every man fearlessly in the face. A short man he seemed in her memory, square built and powerful as a bloodhound, of quick and decisive speech, expecting to be understood before he had half spoken his thoughts; a man, she fancied, who must be untiring and violent of temper, inflexible and brave in the execution of his purpose —a strong contrast outwardly to her tall and graceful lover. Zoroaster's faultless beauty was

a constant delight to her eyes; his soft deep voice sounded voluptuously passionate when he spoke to herself, coldly and deliberately dominating when addressing others. He moved with perfect certainty and assurance of purpose, his whole presence breathed a high and superior wisdom and untainted nobility of mind; he looked and acted like a god, like a being from another world, not subject to mortal passions, nor to the temptations of common mankind. She gloried in his perfection and in the secret knowledge that to her alone he was a man simply and utterly dominated by love. As she thought of him she grew proud and happy in the idea that such a man should be her lover, and she reproached herself for doubting his devotion that evening. After all, she had only complained that he had neglected her—as he had really done, she added. She wondered in her heart whether other men would have done the same in his place, or whether this power of coldly disregarding her presence when he was occupied with

a serious matter were not due to a real and unconquerable hardness in his nature.

But as she lay there, her dark hair streaming over the yellow silk of her pillows, her mind strayed from her lover to the life before her, and the picture rose quickly in her imagination. She even took up the silver mirror that lay beside her and looked at herself by the dim light of the little lamp, and said to herself that she was beautiful, and that many in Shushan would do her homage. She was glad that Atossa was so fair—it would be a better contrast for her own dark southern beauty.

Towards morning she slept, and dreamed of the grand figure of the prophet, as she had seen him stretched upon his death-bed in the upper chamber of the tower; she thought the dead man stirred and opened his glazed eyes and pointed at her with his bony fingers, and spoke words of anger and reproach. Then she woke with a short cry in her terror, and the light of the dawn shone gray and clear through the door-

way of the corridor at the end of her room, where two of her handmaids slept across the threshold, their white cloaks drawn over their heads against the chill air of the night.

Then the trumpets rang out in long-drawn clanging rhythm through the morning air, and Nehushta heard the trampling of the beasts that were being got ready for the journey, in the court without, and the cries of the drivers and of the serving-men. She rose quickly from her bed—a lithe white-clad figure in the dawn light—and pushed the heavy curtains aside and looked out through the lattice; and she forgot her evil dream, for her heart leaped again at the thought that she should no more be shut up in Ecbatana, and that before another month was over she would be in Shushan, in the palace, where she longed to be.

CHAPTER V.

THE sun was almost setting, and his light was already turning to a golden glow upon the vast plain of Shushan, as the caravan of travellers halted for the last time. A few stades away the two mounds rose above the royal city like two tables out of the flat country; the lower one surmounted by the marble columns, the towers and turrets and gleaming architraves of the palace; and in front, upon the right, the higher elevation crowned by the dark and massive citadel of frowning walls and battlements. The place chosen for the halt was the point where the road from Nineveh, into which they had turned when about half-way from Ecbatana, joined the broad road from Babylon, near to the bridge. For some time they had followed the quiet stream of

the Choaspes, and, looking across it, had watched how the fortress seemed to come forward and overhang the river, while the mound of the palace fell away to the background. The city itself was, of course, completely hidden from their view by the steep mounds, that looked as inaccessible as though they had been built of solid masonry.

Everything in the plain was green. Stade upon stade, and farsang upon farsang, the ploughed furrows stretched away to the west and south; the corn standing already green and high, and the fig-trees putting out their broad green leaves. Here and there in the level expanse of country the rays of the declining sun were reflected from the whitewashed walls of a farmhouse; or in the farther distance lingered upon the burnt-brick buildings of an outlying village. Beyond the river, in the broad meadow beneath the turret-clad mound, half-naked, sunburnt boys drove home the small humped cows to the milking, scaring away, as they went, the troops of white horses that pastured in the same field, clapping

their hands and crying out at the little black foals that ran and frisked by the side of their white dams. Here and there a broad-shouldered, bearded fisherman angled in the stream, or flung out a brown casting-net upon the placid waters, drawing it slowly back to the bank, with eyes intent upon the moving cords.

The caravan halted on the turf by the side of the dusty road; the mounted guards, threescore stalwart riders from the Median plains, fell back to make room for the travellers, and, springing to the ground, set about picketing and watering their horses—their brazen armour and scarlet and blue mantles blazing in a mass of rich colour in the evening sun; while their wild white horses, untired by the day's march, plunged and snorted, and shook themselves, and bit each other in play by mane and tail, in the delight of being at least half free.

Zoroaster himself—his purple mantle somewhat whitened with the dust, and his fair face a little browned by the three weeks' journey—

threw the bridle of his horse to a soldier and ran quickly forward. A magnificent litter, closed all around with a gilded lattice, and roofed with three awnings of white linen, one upon the other, as a protection against the sun, was being carefully unyoked from the mules that had borne it. Tall Ethiopian slaves lifted it, and carried it to the greenest spot of the turf by the softly flowing river; and Zoroaster himself pushed back the lattice and spread a rich carpet before it. Nehushta took his proffered hand and stepped lightly out, and stood beside him in the red light. She was veiled, and her purple cloak fell in long folds to her feet, and she stood motionless, with her back to the city, looking towards the setting sun.

"Why do we stop here?" she asked suddenly.

"The Great King, may he live for ever, is said not to be in the city," answered Zoroaster, "and it would ill become us to enter the palace before him." He spoke aloud in the Median language that the slaves might hear him; then he added

in Hebrew and in a lower voice, "It would be scarcely wise, or safe, to enter Shushan when the king is away. Who can tell what may have happened there in these days? Babylon has rebelled; the empire is far from settled. All Persia may be on the very point of a revolt."

"A fitting time indeed for our journey—for me and my women to be travelling abroad with a score of horsemen for a guard! Why did you bring me here? How long are we to remain encamped by the roadside, waiting the pleasure of the populace to let us in, or the convenience of this new king to return?"

Nehushta turned upon her companion as she spoke, and there was a ring of mingled scorn and disappointment in her voice. Her dark eyes stared coldly at Zoroaster from the straight opening between her veils, and before he could answer, she turned her back upon him and moved a few steps away, gazing out at the setting sun across the fertile meadows. The warrior stood still, and a dark flush overspread his face. Then he

turned pale, but whatever were the words that rose to his lips, he did not speak them, but occupied himself with superintending the pitching of the women's tents. The other litters were brought, and set down with their occupants; the long file of camels, some laden with baggage and provisions, some bearing female slaves, kneeled down to be unloaded upon the grass, anxiously craning their long necks the while in the direction of the stream; the tent-pitchers set to work; and at the last another score of horsemen, who had formed the rear-guard of the caravan, cantered up and joined their companions who had already dismounted. With the rapid skill of long practice, all did their share, and in a few minutes all the immense paraphernalia of a Persian encampment were spread out and disposed in place for the night. Contrary to the usual habit Zoroaster had not permitted the tent-pitchers and other slaves to pass on while he and his charges made their noonday halt; for he feared some uprising in the neighbourhood of the city in the absence

of the king, and he wished to keep his whole company together as a measure of safety, even at the sacrifice of Nehushta's convenience.

She herself still stood apart, and haughtily turned away from her serving-women, giving them no answer when they saluted her and offered her cushions and cooling drinks. She drew her cloak more closely about her and tightened her veil upon her face. She was weary, disappointed, almost angry. For days she had dreamed of the reception she would have at the palace, of the king and of the court; of the luxury of rest after her long journey, and of the thousand diversions and excitements she would find in revisiting the scenes of her childhood. It was no small disappointment to find herself condemned to another night in camp; and her first impulse was to blame Zoroaster.

In spite of her love for him, her strong and dominating temper often chafed at his calmness, and resented the resolute superiority of his intelligence; and then, being conscious that her

own dignity suffered by the storms of her temper, she was even more angry than before, with herself, with him, with every one. But Zoroaster was as impassive as marble, saving that now and then his brow flushed, and paled quickly; and his words, if he spoke at all, had a chilled icy ring in them. Sooner or later, Nehushta's passionate temper cooled, and she found him the same as ever, devoted and gentle and loving; then her heart went out to him anew, and all her being was filled with the love of him, even to overflowing.

She had been disappointed now, and would speak to no one. She moved still farther from the crowd of slaves and tent-pitchers, followed at a respectful distance by her handmaidens, who whispered together as they went; and again she stood still and looked westward.

As the sun neared the horizon, his low rays caught upon a rising cloud of dust, small and distant as the smoke of a fire, in the plain towards Babylon, but whirling quickly upwards. Nehushta's eye rested on the far-off point, and

she raised one hand to shade her sight. She remembered how, when she was a girl, she had watched the line of that very road from the palace above, and had seen a cloud of dust arise out of a mere speck, as a body of horsemen galloped into view. There was no mistaking what it was. A troop of horse were coming—perhaps the king himself. Instinctively she turned and looked for Zoroaster, and started, as she saw him standing at a little distance from her, with folded arms, his eyes bent on the horizon. She moved towards him in sudden excitement.

"What is it?" she asked in low tones.

"It is the Great King—may he live for ever!" answered Zoroaster. "None but he would ride so fast along the royal road."

For a moment they stood side by side, watching the dust cloud; and as they stood, Nehushta's hand stole out from her cloak and touched the warrior's arm, softly, with a trembling of the fingers, as though she timidly sought something she would not ask for. Zoroaster turned his

head and saw that her eyes were moistened with tears; he understood, but he would not take her hand, for there were many slaves near, besides Nehushta's kinsfolk, and he would not have had them see; but he looked on her tenderly, and on a sudden, his eyes grew less sad, and the light returned in them.

"My beloved!" he said softly.

"I was wrong, Zoroaster—forgive me," she murmured. She suffered him to lead her to her tent, which was already pitched; and he left her there, sitting at the door and watching his movements, while he called together his men and drew them up in a compact rank by the roadside, to be ready to salute the king.

Nearer and nearer came the cloud; and the red glow turned to purple and the sun went out of sight; and still it came nearer, that whirling cloud-canopy of fine powdered dust, rising to right and left of the road in vast round puffs, and hanging overhead like the smoke from some great moving fire. Then, from beneath it, there

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seemed to come a distant roar like thunder, rising and falling on the silent air, but rising ever louder; and a dark gleam of polished bronze, with something more purple than the purple sunset, took shape slowly; then with the low roar of sound, came now and then, and then more often, the clank of harness and arms; till at last, the whole stamping, rushing, clanging crowd of galloping horsemen seemed to emerge suddenly from the dust in a thundering charge, the very earth shaking beneath their weight, and the whole air vibrating to the tremendous shock of pounding hoofs and the din of clashing brass.

A few lengths before the serried ranks rode one man alone,—a square figure, wrapped in a cloak of deeper and richer purple than any worn by the ordinary nobles, sitting like a rock upon a great white horse. As he came up, Zoroaster and his fourscore men threw up their hands.

"Hail, king of kings! Hail, and live for ever!" they cried, and as one man, they prostrated them-

selves upon their faces on the grass by the road-side.

Darius drew rein suddenly, bringing his steed from his full gallop to his haunches in an instant. After him the rushing riders threw up their right hands as a signal to those behind; and with a deafening concussion, as of the ocean breaking at once against a wall of rock, those matchless Persian horsemen halted in a body in the space of a few yards, their steeds plunging wildly, rearing to their height and struggling on the curb; but helpless to advance against the strong hands that held them. The blossom and flower of all the Persian nobles rode there,—their purple mantles flying with the wild motion, their bronze cuirasses black in the gathering twilight, their bearded faces dark and square beneath their gilded helmets.

"I am Darius, the king of kings, on whom ye call," cried the king, whose steed now stood like a marble statue, immovable in the middle of the road. "Rise, speak and fear nothing,—unless ye speak lies."

Zoroaster rose to his feet, then bent low, and taking a few grains of dust from the roadside, touched his mouth with his hand and let the dust fall upon his forehead.

"Hail, and live for ever! I am thy servant, Zoroaster, who was captain over the fortress and treasury of Ecbatana. According to thy word I have brought the kinsfolk of Jehoiakim, king of Judah,—chief of whom is Nehushta, the princess. I heard that thou wast absent from Shushan, and here I have waited for thy coming. I also sent thee messengers to announce that Daniel, surnamed Belteshazzar, who was Satrap of Media from the time of Cambyses, is dead; and I have buried him fittingly in a new tomb in the garden of the palace of Ecbatana."

Darius, quick and impulsive in every thought and action, sprang to the ground as Zoroaster finished speaking, and coming to him, took both his hands and kissed him on both cheeks.

"What thou hast done is well done,—I know thee of old. Auramazda is with thee. He is

also with me. By his grace I have slain the rebels at Babylon. They spoke lies, so I slew them. Show me Nehushta, the daughter of the kings of Judah."

"I am thy servant. The princess is at hand," answered Zoroaster; but as he spoke, he turned pale to the lips.

By this time it had grown dark, and the moon, just past the full, had not yet risen from behind the mound of the fortress. The slaves brought torches of mingled wax and fir-gum, and their black figures shone strangely in the red glare, as they pressed toward the door of Nehushta's tent, lighting the way for the king.

Darius strode quickly forward, his gilded harness clanging as he walked, the strong flaring light illuminating his bold dark features. Under the striped curtain, drawn up to form the entrance of the tent, stood Nehushta. She had thrown aside her veil and her women had quickly placed upon her head the linen tiara, where a single jewel shone like a star in the white folds. Her

thick black hair fell in masses upon her shoulders, and her mantle was thrown back, displaying the grand proportions of her figure, clad in tunic and close-fitting belt. As the king came near, she kneeled and prostrated herself before him, touching her forehead to the ground, and waiting for him to speak.

He stood still a full minute and his eyes flashed fire, as he looked on her crouching figure, in very pride that so queenly a woman should be forced to kneel at his feet—but more in sudden admiration of her marvellous beauty. Then he bent down, and took her hand and raised her to her feet. She sprang up, and faced him with glowing cheeks and flashing eyes; and as she stood she was nearly as tall as he.

"I would not that a princess of thy line kneeled before me," said he; and in his voice there was a strange touch of softness. "Wilt thou let me rest here awhile before I go up to Shushan? I am weary of riding and thirsty from the road."

"Hail, king of the world! I am thy servant. Rest thee and refresh thee here," answered Nehushta, drawing back into the tent. The king beckoned to Zoroaster to follow him and went in.

Darius sat upon the carved folding-chair that stood in the midst of the tent by the main pole, and eagerly drained the huge golden goblet of Shiraz wine which Zoroaster poured for him. Then he took off his headpiece, and his thick, coarse hair fell in a mass of dark curls to his neck, like the mane of a black lion. He breathed a long breath as of relief and enjoyment of well-earned repose, and leaned back in his chair, letting his eyes rest on Nehushta's face as she stood before him looking down to the ground. Zoroaster remained on one side, holding the replenished goblet in his hand, in case the king's thirst were not assuaged by a single draught.

"Thou art fair, daughter of Jerusalem," said the king presently. "I remember thy beauty, for I saw thee in Ecbatana. I sent for thee and thy kinsfolk that I might do thee honour; and I will

also fulfil my words. I will take thee to be my wife."

Darius spoke quietly, in his usual tone of absolute determination. But if the concentrated fury of a thousand storms had suddenly broken loose in the very midst of the tent, the effect could not have been more terrible on his hearers.

Nehushta's face flushed suddenly, and for a moment she trembled in every joint; then she fell on her knees, prostrate before the king's feet, all the wealth of her splendid hair falling loose about her. Darius sat still, as though watching the result of his speech. He might have sat long, but in an instant, Zoroaster sprang between the king and the kneeling woman; and the golden goblet he had held rolled across the thick carpet on the ground, while the rich red wine ran in a slow stream towards the curtains of the door. His face was livid and his eyes like coals of blue fire, his fair locks and his long golden beard caught the torchlight and shone about him like a glory, as he stood up to his grand height and faced

the king. Darius never quailed nor moved; his look met Zoroaster's with fearless boldness. Zoroaster spoke first, in low accents of concentrated fury:

"Nehushta the princess is my betrothed bride. Though thou wert king of the stars as well as king of the earth, thou shalt not have her for thy wife."

Darius smiled, not scornfully, an honest smile of amusement, as he stared at the wrathful figure of the northern man before him.

"I am the king of kings," he answered. "I will marry this princess of Judah to-morrow, and thee I will crucify upon the highest turret of Shushan, because thou speakest lies when thou sayest I shall not marry her."

"Fool! tempt not thy God! Threaten not him who is stronger than thou, lest he slay thee with his hands where thou sittest." Zoroaster's voice sounded low and distinct as the knell of relentless fate, and his hand went out towards the king's throat.

Until this moment, Darius had sat in his indifferent attitude, smiling carelessly, though never taking his eye from his adversary. Brave as the bravest, he scorned to move until he was attacked, and he would have despised the thought of calling to his guards. But when Zoroaster's hand went out to seize him, he was ready. With a spring like a tiger, he flew at the strong man's throat, and sought to drag him down, striving to fasten his grip about the collar of his cuirass, but Zoroaster slipped his hand quickly under his adversary's, his sleeve went back and his long white arm ran like a fetter of steel about the king's neck, while his other hand gripped him by the middle; so they held each other like wrestlers, one arm above the shoulder and one below, and strove with all their might.

The king was short, but in his thick-set broad shoulders and knotted arms there lurked the strength of a bull and the quickness of a tiger. Zoroaster had the advantage, for his right arm was round Darius's neck, but while one might

count a score, neither moved a hairbreadth, and the blue veins stood out like cords on the tall man's arm. The fiery might of the southern prince was matched against the stately strength of the fair northerner, whose face grew as white as death, while the king's brow was purple with the agony of effort. They both breathed hard between their clenched teeth, but neither uttered a word.

Nehushta had leaped to her feet in terror at the first sign of the coming strife, but she did not cry out, nor call in the slaves or guards. She stood, holding the tent-pole with one hand, and gathering her mantle to her breast with the other, gazing in absolute fascination at the fearful life and death struggle, at the unspeakable and tremendous strength so silently exerted by the two men before her.

Suddenly they moved and swayed. Darius had attempted to trip Zoroaster with one foot, but slipping on the carpet wet with wine, had been bent nearly double to the ground; then by a

violent effort, he regained his footing. But the great exertion had weakened his strength. Nehushta thought a smile flickered on Zoroaster's pale face and his flashing dark blue eyes met hers for a moment, and then the end began. Slowly, and by imperceptible degrees, Zoroaster forced the king down before him, doubling him backwards with irresistible strength, till it seemed as though bone and sinew and muscle must be broken and torn asunder in the desperate resistance. Then, at last, when his head almost touched the ground, Darius groaned and his limbs relaxed. Instantly Zoroaster threw him on his back and kneeled with his whole weight upon his chest,—the gilded scales of the corslet cracking beneath the burden, and he held the king's hands down on either side, pinioned to the floor. Darius struggled desperately twice and then lay quite still. Zoroaster gazed down upon him with blazing eyes.

"Thou who wouldst crucify me upon Shushan," he said through his teeth. "I will slay thee here even as thou didst slay Smerdis. Hast thou

anything to say? Speak quickly, for thy hour is come."

Even in the extremity of his agony, vanquished and at the point of death, Darius was brave, as brave men are, to the very last. He would indeed have called for help now, but there was no breath in him. He still gazed fearlessly into the eyes of his terrible conqueror. His voice came in a hoarse whisper.

"I fear not death. Slay on if thou wilt—thou —hast—conquered."

Nehushta had come near. She trembled now that the fight was over, and looked anxiously to the heavy curtains of the tent-door.

"Tell him," she whispered to Zoroaster, "that you will spare him if he will do no harm to you, nor to me."

"Spare him!" echoed Zoroaster scornfully. "He is almost dead now—why should I spare him?"

"For my sake, beloved," answered Nehushta, with a sudden and passionate gesture of entreaty.

"He is the king—he speaks truth; if he says he will not harm you, trust him."

"If I slay thee not, swear thou wilt not harm me nor Nehushta," said Zoroaster, removing one knee from the chest of his adversary.

"By the name of Auramazda," gasped Darius, "I will not harm thee nor her."

"It is well," said Zoroaster. "I will let thee go. And as for taking her to be thy wife, thou mayest ask her if she will wed thee," he added. He rose and helped the king to his feet. Darius shook himself and breathed hard for a few minutes. He felt his limbs as a man might do who had fallen from his horse, and then he sat down upon the chair, and broke into a loud laugh.

Darius was well known to all Persia and Media before the events of the last two months, and such was his reputation for abiding by his promise that he was universally trusted by those about him. Zoroaster had known him also, and he remembered his easy familiarity and love of jesting, so that even when he held the king at such vantage

that he might have killed him by a little additional pressure of his weight, he felt not the least hesitation in accepting his promise of safety. But remembering what a stake had been played for in the desperate issue, he could not join in the king's laugh. He stood silently apart, and looked at Nehushta who leaned back against the tent-pole in violent agitation; her hands wringing each other beneath her long sleeves, and her eyes turning from the king to Zoroaster, and back again to the king, in evident distress and fear.

"Thou hast a mighty arm, Zoroaster," cried Darius, as his laughter subsided, "and thou hadst well-nigh made an end of the Great King and of Persia, Media, Babylon and Egypt in thy grip."

"Let the king pardon his servant," answered Zoroaster, "if his knee was heavy and his hand strong. Had not the king slipped upon the spilt wine, his servant would have been thrown down."

"And thou wouldst have been crucified at dawn," added Darius, laughing again. "It is well for thee that I am Darius and not Cambyses,

or thou wouldst not be standing there before me while my guards are gossiping idly in the road. Give me a cup of wine since thou hast spared my life!" Again the king laughed as though his sides would break. Zoroaster hastily filled another goblet and offered it, kneeling before the monarch. Darius paused before he took the cup, and looked at the kneeling warrior's pale proud face. Then he spoke and his voice dropped to a less mirthful key, as he laid his hand on Zoroaster's shoulder.

"I love thee, prince," he said, "because thou art stronger than I; and as brave and more merciful. Therefore shalt thou stand ever at my right hand and I will trust thee with my life in thy hand. And in pledge hereunto I put my own chain of gold about thy neck, and I drink this cup to thee; and whosoever shall harm a hair of thine head shall perish in torments."

The king drank; and Zoroaster, overcome with genuine admiration of the great soul that could so easily forgive so dire an offence, bent and embraced the king's knees in token of adherence,

and as a seal of that friendship which was never to be broken until death parted the two men asunder.

Then they arose, and at Zoroaster's order, the princess's litter was brought, and leaving the encampment to follow after them, they went up to the palace. Nehushta was borne between the litters of her women and her slaves on foot, but Zoroaster mounted his horse and rode slowly and in silence by the right side of the Great King.

CHAPTER VI.

ATHWART the gleaming colonnades of the eastern balcony, the early morning sun shone brightly, and all the shadows of the white marble cornices and capitals and jutting frieze work were blue with the reflection of the cloudless sky. The swallows now and then shot in under the overhanging roof and flew up and down the covered terrace; then with a quick rush, they sped forth again into the dancing sunshine with clean sudden sweep, as when a sharp sword is whirled in the air. Far below, the soft mist of the dawn still lay upon the city, whence the distant cries of the water-carriers and fruitsellers came echoing up from the waking streets, the call of the women to one another from the housetops, and now and then the neighing of a horse far out upon the

meadows; while the fleet swallows circled over all in swift wide curves, with a silvery fresh stream of unceasing twittering music.

Zoroaster paced the balcony alone. He was fully armed, with his helmet upon his head; the crest of the winged wheels was replaced by the ensign Darius had chosen for himself,—the half-figure of a likeness of the king with long straight wings on either side, of wrought gold and very fine workmanship. The long purple mantle hung to his heels and the royal chain of gold was about his neck. As he walked the gilded leather of his shoes was reflected in the polished marble pavement and he trod cautiously, for the clean surface was slippery as the face of a mirror. At one end of the terrace a stairway led down to the lower story of the palace, and at the other end a high square door was masked by a heavy curtain of rich purple and gold stuff, that fell in thick folds to the glassy floor. Each time his walk brought him to this end Zoroaster paused, as though expecting that some one should come

out. But as it generally happens when a man is waiting for something or some one that the object or person appears unexpectedly, so it occurred that as he turned back from the staircase towards the curtain, he saw that some one had already advanced half the length of the balcony to meet him—and it was not the person for whom he was looking.

At first, he was dazzled for a moment, but his memory served him instantly and he recognised the face and form of a woman he had known and often seen before. She was not tall, but so perfectly proportioned that it was impossible to wish that she were taller. Her close tunic of palest blue, bordered with a gold embroidery at the neck, betrayed the matchless symmetry of her figure, the unspeakable grace of development of a woman in the fullest bloom of beauty. From her knees to her feet, her under tunic showed the purple and white bands that none but the king might wear, and which even for the queen was an undue assumption of the royal insignia. But

Zoroaster did not look at her dress, nor at her mantle of royal sea-purple, nor at the marvellous white hands that held together a written scroll. His eyes rested on her face, and he stood still where he was.

He knew those straight and perfect features, not large nor heavy, but of such rare mould and faultless type as man has not seen since, neither will see. The perfect curve of the fresh mouth; the white forward chin with its sunk depression in the midst; the deep-set, blue eyes and the straight pencilled brows; the broad smooth forehead and the tiny ear half hidden in the glory of sun-golden hair; the milk-white skin just tinged with the faint rose-light that never changed or reddened in heat or cold, in anger or in joy—he knew them all; the features of royal Cyrus made soft and womanly in substance, but unchanging still and faultlessly cold in his great daughter Atossa, the child of kings, the wife of kings, the mother of kings.

The heavy curtains had fallen together behind

her, and she came forward alone. She had seen Zoroaster before he had seen her, and she moved on without showing any surprise, the heels of her small golden shoes clicking sharply on the polished floor. Zoroaster remained standing for a moment, and then, removing his helmet in salutation, went to one side of the head of the staircase and waited respectfully for the queen to pass. As she came on, passing alternately through the shadow cast by the columns, and the sunlight that blazed between, her advancing figure flashed with a new illumination at every step. She made as though she were going straight on, but as she passed over the threshold to the staircase, she suddenly stopped and turned half round, and looked straight at Zoroaster.

"Thou art Zoroaster," she said in a smooth and musical voice, like the ripple of a clear stream flowing through summer meadows.

"I am Zoroaster, thy servant," he answered, bowing his head. He spoke very coldly.

"I remember thee well," said the queen, lin-

gering by the head of the staircase. "Thou art little changed, saving that thou art stronger, I should think, and more of a soldier than formerly."

Zoroaster stood turning his polished helmet in his hands, but he answered nothing; he cared little for the queen's praises. But she, it seemed, was desirous of pleasing him in proportion as he was less anxious to be pleased, for she turned again and walked forward upon the terrace.

"Come into the sunlight—the morning air is cold," she said, "I would speak with thee awhile."

A carved chair stood in a corner of the balcony. Zoroaster moved it into the sunshine, and Atossa sat down, smiling her thanks to him, while he stood leaning against the balustrade,—a magnificent figure as the light caught his gilded harness and gold neck-chain, and played on his long fair beard and nestled in the folds of his purple mantle.

"Tell me—you came last night?" she asked, spreading her dainty hands in the sunshine as though to warm them. She never feared the sun,

for he was friendly to her nativity and never seemed to scorch her fair skin like that of meaner women.

"Thy servant came last night," answered the prince.

"Bringing Nehushta and the other Hebrews?" added the queen.

"Even so."

"Tell me something of this Nehushta," said Atossa. She had dropped into a more familiar form of speech. But Zoroaster was careful of his words and never allowed his language to relapse from the distant form of address of a subject to his sovereign.

"The queen knoweth her. She was here as a young child a few years since," he replied. He chose to let Atossa ask questions for all the information she needed.

"It is so long ago," she said, with a little sigh. "Is she fair?"

"Nay, she is dark, after the manner of the Hebrews."

"And the Persians too," she interrupted.

"She is very beautiful," continued Zoroaster. "She is very tall." Atossa looked up quickly with a smile. She was not tall herself, with all her beauty.

"You admire tall women?"

"Yes," said Zoroaster calmly—well knowing what he said. He did not wish to flatter the queen; and besides he knew her too well to do so if he wished to please her. She was one of those women who are not accustomed to doubt their own superiority over the rest of their sex.

"Then you admire this Hebrew princess?" said she, and paused for an answer. But her companion was as cold and calm as she. Seeing himself directly pressed by a suspicion, he changed his tactics and flattered Atossa for the sake of putting a stop to her questions.

"Height is not of itself beauty," he answered with a courteous smile. "There is a kind of beauty which no height can improve,—a perfec-

tion which needs not to be set high for all men to acknowledge it."

The queen simply took no notice of the compliment, but it had its desired effect, for she changed the tone of her talk a little, speaking more seriously.

"Where is she? I will go and see her," she said.

"She rested last night in the upper chambers in the southern part of the palace. Thy servant will bid her come if it be thy desire."

"Presently, presently," answered the queen. "It is yet early, and she was doubtless weary of the journey."

There was a pause. Zoroaster looked down at the beautiful queen as she sat beside him, and wondered whether she had changed; and as he gazed, he fell to comparing her beauty with Nehushta's, and his glance grew more intent than he had meant it should be, so that Atossa looked up suddenly and met his eyes resting on her face.

"It is long since we have met, Zoroaster," she

said quickly. "Tell me of your life in that wild fortress. You have prospered in your profession of arms—you wear the royal chain." She put up her hand and touched the links as though to feel them. "Indeed it is very like the chain Darius wore when he went to Babylon the other day." She paused a moment as though trying to recall something; then continued: "Yes—now I think of it, he had no chain when he came back. It is his—of course—why has he given it to you?" Her tones had a tinge of uncertainty in the question,—half imperious, as demanding an answer, half persuading, as though not sure the answer would be given. Zoroaster remembered that intonation of her sweet voice, and he smiled in his beard.

"Indeed," he answered, "the Great King who liveth for ever, put this chain about my neck with his own hands last night, when he halted by the roadside, as a reward, I presume, for certain qualities he believeth his servant Zoroaster to possess."

"Qualities—what qualities?"

"Nay, the queen cannot expect me to sing faithfully my own praises. Nevertheless, I am ready to die for the Great King. He knoweth that I am. May he live for ever!"

"It may be that one of the qualities was the successful performance of the extremely difficult task you have lately accomplished," said Atossa, with a touch of scorn.

"A task?" repeated Zoroaster.

"Yes—have you not brought a handful of Hebrew women all the way from Ecbatana to Shushan, through numberless dangers and difficulties, safe and sound, and so carefully prudent of their comfort that they are not even weary, nor have they once hungered or thirsted by the way, nor lost the smallest box of perfume, nor the tiniest of their golden hair-pins? Surely you have deserved to have a royal chain hung about your neck and to be called the king's friend."

"The reward was doubtless greater than my desert. It was no great feat of arms that I had

to perform; and yet, in these days a man may leave Media under one king, and reach Shushan under another. The queen knoweth better than any one what sudden changes may take place in the empire," answered Zoroaster, looking calmly into her face as he stood; and she who had been the wife of Cambyses and the wife of the murdered Gomata-Smerdis, and who was now the wife of Darius, looked down and was silent, turning over in her beautiful hands the sealed scroll she bore.

The sun had risen higher while they talked, and his rays were growing hot in the clear air. The mist had lifted from the city below, and all the streets and open places were alive with noisy buyers and sellers, whose loud talking and disputing came up in a continuous hum to the palace on the hill, like the drone of a swarm of bees. The queen rose from her seat.

"It is too warm here," she said, and she once more moved toward the stairway. Zoroaster followed her respectfully, still holding his helmet in

his hand. Atossa did not speak till she reached the threshold. Then, as Zoroaster bowed low before her, she paused and looked at him with her clear, deep-blue eyes.

"You have grown very formal in four years," she said softly. "You used to be more outspoken and less of a courtier. I am not changed—we must be friends as we were formerly."

Zoroaster hesitated a moment before he answered:

"I am the Great King's man," he said slowly. "I am, therefore, also the queen's servant."

Atossa raised her delicate eyebrows a little and a shade of annoyance passed for the first time over her perfect face, which gave her a look of sternness.

"I am the queen," she said coldly. "The king may take other wives, but I am the queen. Take heed that you be indeed my servant." Then, as she gathered her mantle about her and put one foot upon the stairs, she touched his shoulder gently with the tips of her fingers and added with

a sudden smile, "And I will be your friend." So she passed down the stairs out of sight, leaving Zoroaster alone.

Slowly he paced the terrace again, reflecting profoundly upon his situation. Indeed he had no small cause for anxiety; it was evident that the queen suspected his love for Nehushta, and he was more than half convinced that there were reasons why such an affection would inevitably meet with her disapproval. In former days, before she was married to Cambyses, and afterwards, before Zoroaster had been sent into Media, Atossa had shown so marked a liking for him, that a man more acquainted with the world would have guessed that she loved him. He had not suspected such a thing, but with a keen perception of character, he had understood that beneath the beautiful features and the frank gentleness of the young princess, there lurked a profound intelligence, an unbending ambition and a cold selfishness without equal; he had mistrusted her, but he had humoured her caprices and been in truth

a good friend to her, without in the least wishing to accept her friendship for himself in return. He was but a young captain of five hundred then, although he was the favourite of the court; but his strong arm was dreaded as well as the cutting force of his replies when questioned, and no word of the court gossip had therefore reached his ears concerning Atossa's admiration for him. It was, moreover, so evident that he cared nothing for her beyond the most unaffected friendliness, that her disappointment in not moving his heart was a constant source of satisfaction to her enemies. There had reigned in those days a great and unbridled license in the court, and the fact of the daughter of Cyrus loving and being loved by the handsomest of the king's guards, would not of itself have attracted overmuch notice. But the evident innocence of Zoroaster in the whole affair, and the masterly fashion in which Atossa concealed her anger, if she felt any, caused the matter to be completely forgotten as soon as Zoroaster left Shushan, and events had, since then,

succeeded each other too rapidly to give the courtiers leisure for gossiping about old scandals. The isolation in which Gomata had lived during the seven months while he maintained the popular impression that he was not Gomata-Smerdis, but Smerdis the brother of Cambyses, had broken up the court; and the strong, manly character of Darius had checked the license of the nobles suddenly, as a horse-breaker brings up an unbroken colt by flinging the noose about his neck. The king permitted that the ancient custom of marrying as many as four wives should be maintained, and he himself soon set an example by so doing; but he had determined that the whole corrupt fabric of court life should be shattered at one blow; and with his usual intrepid disregard of consequences and his iron determination to maintain his opinions, he had suffered no contradiction of his will. He had married Atossa,—in the first place, because she was the most beautiful woman in Persia; and secondly, because he comprehended her great intelligence and capacity

for affairs, and believed himself able to make use of her at his pleasure. As for Atossa herself, she had not hesitated a moment in concurring in the marriage,—she had ruled her former husbands, and she would rule Darius in like manner, she thought, to her own complete aggrandisement and in the face of all rivals. As yet, the king had taken no second wife, although he looked with growing admiration upon the maiden Artystoné, who was then but fifteen years of age, the youngest daughter of Cyrus and own sister to Atossa.

All this Zoroaster knew, and he recognised also from the meeting he had just had with the queen, that she was desirous of maintaining her friendship with himself. But since the violent scene of the previous night, he had determined to be the king's man in truest loyalty, and he feared lest Atossa's plans might, before long, cross her husband's. Therefore he accepted her offer of friendship coldly, and treated her with the most formal courtesy. On the other hand, he understood well enough that if she resented his manner

of acting towards her, and ascertained that he really loved Nehushta, it would be in her power to produce difficulties and complications which he would have every cause for fearing. She would certainly discover the king's admiration for Nehushta. Darius was a man almost incapable of concealment; with whom to think was to act instantly and without hesitation. He generally acted rightly, for his instincts were noble and kingly, and his heart as honest and open as the very light of day. He said what he thought and instantly fulfilled his words. He hated a lie as poison, and the only untruth he had ever been guilty of was told when, in order to gain access to the dwelling of the false Smerdis, he had declared to the guards that he brought news of importance from his father. He had justified this falsehood by the most elaborate and logical apology to his companions, the six princes, and had explained that he only lied for the purpose of saving Persia; and when the lot fell to himself to assume the royal authority, he

fulfilled most amply every promise he had given of freeing the country from tyranny, religious despotism and, generally, from what he termed "lies." As for the killing of Gomata-Smerdis, it was an act of public justice, approved by all sensible persons as soon as it was known by what frauds that impostor had seized the kingdom.

With regard to Atossa, Darius had abstained from asking her questions about her seven months of marriage with the usurper. She must have known well enough who the man was, but Darius understood her character well enough to know that she would marry whomsoever she saw in the chief place, and that her counsel and courage would be of inestimable advantage to a ruler. She herself never mentioned the past events to the king, knowing his hatred of lies on the one hand, and that on the other, the plain truth would redound to her discredit. He had given her to understand as much from the first, telling her that he took her for what she was, and not for what she had been. Her mind was at rest about

the past, and as for the future, she promised herself her full share in her husband's success, should he succeed, and unbounded liberty in the choice of his successor, should he fail.

But all these considerations did not tend to clear Zoroaster's vision in regard to his own future. He saw himself already placed in a position of extreme difficulty between Nehushta and the king. On the other hand, he dreaded lest he should before long fall into disgrace with the king on account of Atossa's treatment of himself, or incur Atossâ's displeasure through the great favour he received from Darius. He knew the queen to be an ambitious woman, capable of the wildest conceptions, and possessed of the utmost skill for their execution.

He longed to see Nehushta and talk with her at once,—to tell her many things and to warn her of many possibilities; above all, he desired to discuss with her the scene of the previous night and the strangely sudden determination the king had expressed to make her his wife.

But he could not leave his post. His orders had been to await the king in the morning upon the eastern terrace; and there he must abide until it pleased Darius to come forth; and he knew Nehushta would not venture down into that part of the palace. He wondered that the king did not come, and he chafed at the delay as he saw the sun rising higher and higher, and the shadows deepening in the terrace. Weary of waiting he sat down at last upon the chair where Atossa had rested, and folded his hands over his sword-hilt,—resigning himself to the situation with the philosophy of a trained soldier.

Sitting thus alone, he fell to dreaming. As he gazed out at the bright sky, he forgot his life and his love, and all things of the present; and his mind wandered away among the thoughts most natural and most congenial to his profound intellect. His attention became fixed in the contemplation of a larger dimension of intelligences,—the veil of darkness parted a little, and for a time he saw clearly in the light of a Greater Universe.

CHAPTER VII.

ATOSSA quitted the terrace where she had been talking with Zoroaster, in the full intention of returning speedily, but as she descended the steps, a plan formed itself in her mind, which she determined to put into immediate execution. Instead, therefore, of pursuing her way into the portico of the inner court, when she reached the foot of the staircase, she turned into a narrow passage that led into a long corridor, lighted only by occasional small openings in the wall. A little door gave access to this covered way, and when she entered, she closed it behind her, and tried to fasten it. But the bolt was rusty, and in order to draw it, she laid down the scroll she carried, upon a narrow stone seat by the side of the door; and then, with a strong effort of both

her small white hands, she succeeded in moving the lock into its place. Then she turned quickly and hastened down the dusky corridor. At the opposite end a small winding stair led upwards into darkness. There were stains upon the lowest steps, just visible in the half light. Atossa gathered up her mantle and her under tunic, and trod daintily, with a look of repugnance on her beautiful face. The stains were made by the blood of the false Smerdis, her last husband, slain in that dark stairway by Darius, scarcely three months before.

Cautiously the queen felt her way upward till she reached a landing, where a narrow aperture admitted a little light. Higher up there were windows, and she looked carefully to her dress, and brushed away a little dust that her mantle had swept from the wall in passing; and once or twice, she looked back at the dark staircase with an expression of something akin to disgust. At last she reached a door which opened upon a terrace, much like the one where she had left

Zoróaster a few moments before, saving that the floor was less polished, and that the spaces between the columns were half filled with hanging plants and creepers. Upon the pavement at one end were spread rich carpets, and half a dozen enormous cushions of soft-coloured silk were thrown negligently one upon the other. Three doors, hung with curtains, opened upon the balcony,—and near to the middle one, two slave-girls, clad in white, crouched upon their heels and talked in an undertone.

Atossa stepped forward upon the marble, and the rustle of her dress and the quick short sound of her heeled shoes, roused the two slave-girls to spring to their feet. They did not know the queen, but they thought it best to make a low obeisance, while their dark eyes endeavoured quickly to scan the details of her dress, without exhibiting too much boldness. Atossa beckoned to one of them to come to her, and smiled graciously as the dark-skinned girl approached.

"Is not thy mistress Nehushta?" she inquired;

but the girl looked stupidly at her, not comprehending her speech. "Nehushta," repeated the queen, pronouncing the name very distinctly with a questioning intonation, and pointing to the curtained door. The slave understood the name and the question, and quick as thought, she disappeared within, leaving Atossa in some hesitation. She had not intended to send for the Hebrew princess, for she thought it would be a greater compliment to let Nehushta find her waiting; but since the barbarian slave had gone to call her mistress, there was nothing to be done but to abide the result.

Nehushta, however, seemed in no hurry to answer the summons, for the queen had ample time to examine the terrace, and to glance through the hanging plants at the sunlit meadows and the flowing stream to southward, before she heard steps behind the curtain, and saw it lifted to allow the princess to pass.

The dark maiden was now fully refreshed and rested from the journey, and she came forward to

greet her guest in her tunic, without her mantle, a cloud of soft white Indian gauze loosely pinned upon her black hair and half covering her neck. Her bodice-like belt was of scarlet and gold, and from one side there hung a rich-hilted knife of Indian steel in a jewelled sheath. The long sleeves of her tunic were drawn upon her arms into hundreds of minute folds, and where the delicate stuff hung in an oblong lappet over her hands, there was fine needlework and embroidery of gold. She moved easily, with a languid grace of secure motion; and she bent her head a little as Atossa came quickly to meet her.

The queen's frank smile was on her face as she grasped both Nehushta's hands in cordial welcome, and for a moment, the two women looked into each other's eyes. Nehushta had made up her mind to hate Atossa from the first, but she did not belong to that class of women who allow their feelings to show themselves, and afterwards feel bound by the memory of what they have shown. She, too, smiled most sweetly as she sur-

veyed the beautiful fair queen from beneath her long drooping lids, and examined her appearance with all possible minuteness. She remembered her well enough, but so warm was the welcome she received, that she almost thought she had misjudged Atossa in calling her hard and cold. She drew her guest to the cushions upon the carpets, and they sat down side by side.

"I have been talking about you already this morning, my princess," began Atossa, speaking at once in familiar terms, as though she were conversing with an intimate friend. Nehushta was very proud; she knew herself to be of a race as royal as Atossa, though now almost extinct; and in answering, she spoke in the same manner as the queen; so that the latter was inwardly amused at the self-confidence of the Hebrew princess.

"Indeed?" said Nehushta, "there must be far more interesting things than I in Shushan. I would have talked of you had I found any one to talk with."

The queen laughed a little.

"As I was coming out this morning, I met an old friend of mine upon the balcony before the king's apartment,—Zoroaster, the handsome captain. We fell into conversation. How handsome he has grown since I saw him last!" The queen watched Nehushta closely while affecting the greatest unconcern, and she thought the shadows about the princess's eyes turned a shade darker at the mention of the brilliant warrior. But Nehushta answered calmly enough:

"He took the most excellent care of us. I should like to see him to-day, to thank him for all he did. I was tired last night and must have seemed ungrateful."

"What need is there of ever telling men we are grateful for what they do for us?" returned the queen. "I should think there were not a noble in the Great King's guard who would not give his right hand to take care of you for a month, even if you never so much as noticed his existence."

Nehushta laughed lightly at the compliment.

"You honour me too much," she said, "but I suppose it is because most women think as you do that men call us so ungrateful. I think you judge from the standpoint of the queen, whereas I——"

"Whereas you look at things from the position of the beautiful princess, who is worshipped for herself alone, and not for the bounty and favour she may, or may not, dispense to her subjects."

"The queen is dispensing much bounty and favour to one of her subjects at this very moment," answered Nehushta quietly, as though deprecating further flattery.

"How glad you must be to have left that dreadful fortress at last!" cried the queen sympathetically. "My father used to go there every summer. I hated the miserable place, with those tiresome mountains and those endless gardens without the least variety in them. You must be very glad to have come here!"

"It is true," replied Nehushta, "I never ceased to dream of Shushan. I love the great city, and

the people, and the court. I thought sometimes that I should have died of the weariness of Ecbatana. The winters were unbearable!"

"You must learn to love us, too," said Atossa, very sweetly. "The Great King wishes well to your race, and will certainly do much for your country. There is, moreover, a kinsman of yours, who is coming soon, expressly to confer with the king concerning the further rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem."

"Zorobabel?" asked Nehushta, quickly.

"Yes—that is his name, I believe. Do you say Zerub-Ebel, or Zerub-Abel? I know nothing of your language."

"His name is Zorob-Abel," answered Nehushta. "Oh, I wish he might persuade the Great King to do something for my people! Your father would have done so much if he had lived."

"Doubtless the Great King will do all that is possible for establishing the Hebrews and promoting their welfare," said the queen; but a distant

look in her eyes showed that her thoughts were no longer concentrated on the subject. "Your friend Zoroaster," she added presently, "could be of great service to you and your cause, if he wished."

"I would that he were a Hebrew!" exclaimed Nehushta, with a little sigh, which did not escape Atossa.

"Is he not? I always thought that he had secretly embraced your faith. With his love of study and with his ideas, it seemed so natural."

"No," replied Nehushta, "he is not one of us, nor will he ever be. After all, though, it is perhaps of little moment what one believes when one is so just as he."

"I have never been able to understand the importance of religion," said the beautiful queen, spreading her white hand upon the purple of her mantle, and contemplating its delicate outline tenderly. "For my own part, I am fond of the sacrifices and the music and the chants. I love to see the priests go up to the altar, two and

two, in their white robes,—and then to see how they struggle to hold up the bullock's head, so that his eyes may see the sun,—and how the red blood gushes out like a beautiful fountain. Have you ever seen a great sacrifice?"

"Oh yes! I remember when I was quite a little girl, when Cambyses—I mean—when the king came to the throne—it was magnificent!" Nehushta was not used to hesitate in her speech but as she recalled the day when Cambyses was made king, it suddenly came over her that any reminiscences of the past might be painful to the extraordinary woman by her side. But Atossa showed no signs of being disturbed. On the contrary, she smiled more sweetly than ever, though there was perhaps a slight affectation of sadness in her voice as she answered:

"Do not fear to hurt me by referring to those times, dear princess. I am accustomed to speak of them well enough. Yes, indeed I remember that great day, with the bright sun shining upon the procession, and the cars with four horses that

they dedicated to the sun, and the milk-white horse that they slaughtered upon the steps of the temple. How I cried for him, poor beast! It seemed so cruel to sacrifice a horse! Even a few black slaves would have been a more natural offering, or a couple of Scythians."

"I remember," said Nehushta, somewhat relieved at the queen's tone. "Of course I have now and then seen processions in Ecbatana, but Daniel would not let me go to the temple. They say Ecbatana is very much changed since the Great King has not gone there in summer. It is very quiet—it is given over to horse-merchants and grain-sellers, and they bring all the salted fish there from the Hyrcanian sea, so that some of the streets smell horribly."

Atossa laughed at the description, more out of courtesy than because it amused her.

"In my time," she answered, "the horse-market was in the meadow by the road towards Zagros, and the fish-sellers were not allowed to come within a farsang of the city. The royal nostrils

were delicate. But everything is changed—here, everywhere. We have had several—revolutions —religious ones, I mean of course, and so many people have been killed that there is a savour of death in the air. It is amazing how much trouble people will give themselves about the question of sacrificing a horse to the sun, or a calf to Auramazda, or an Ethiopian to Nabon or Ashtaroth! And these Magians! They are really no more descendants of the priests in the Aryan home than I am a Greek. Half of them are nearly black—they are Hindus and speak Persian with an accent. They believe in a vast number of gods of all sizes and descriptions, and they sing hymns, in which they say that all these gods are the same. It is most confusing, and as the principal part of their chief sacrifice consists in making themselves exceedingly drunk with the detestable milkweed juice of which they are so fond, the performance is disgusting. The Great King began by saying that if they wished to sacrifice to their deities, they might do so, pro-

vided no one could find them doing it; and if they wished to be drunk, they might be drunk when and where they pleased; but that if they did the two together, he would crucify every Magian in Persia. His argument was very amusing. He said that a man who is drunk naturally speaks the truth, whereas a man who sacrifices to false gods inevitably tells lies; wherefore a man who sacrifices to false gods when he is drunk, runs the risk of telling lies and speaking the truth at the same time, and is consequently a creature revolting to logic, and must be immediately destroyed for the good of the whole race of mankind."

Nehushta had listened with varying attention to the queen's account of the religious difficulties in the kingdom, and she laughed at the Megœric puzzle by which Darius justified the death of the Magians. But in her heart she longed to see Zoroaster, and was weary of entertaining her royal guest. By way of diversion she clapped her hands, and ordered the slaves who came at

her summons to bring sweetmeats and sherbet of crushed fruit and snow.

"Are you fond of hunting?" asked Atossa, delicately taking a little piece of white fig-paste.

"I have never been allowed to hunt," answered Nehushta. "Besides, it must be very tiring."

"I delight in it—the fig-paste is not so good as it used to be—there is a new confectioner. Darius considered that the former one had religious convictions involving the telling of lies—and this is the result! We are fallen low indeed when we cannot eat a Magian's pastry! I am passionately fond of hunting, but it is far from here to the desert and the lions are scarce. Besides, the men who are fit for lion-hunting are generally engaged in hunting their fellow-creatures."

"Does the Great King hunt?" inquired Nehushta, languidly sipping her sherbet from a green jade goblet, as she lay among her cushions, supporting herself upon one elbow.

"Whenever he has leisure. He will talk of nothing else to you——"

"Surely," interrupted Nehushta, with an air of perfect innocence, "I shall not be so far honoured as that the Great King should talk with me?"

Atossa raised her blue eyes and looked curiously at the dark princess. She knew nothing of what had passed the night before, save that the king had seen Nehushta for a few moments, but she knew his character well enough to imagine that his frank and, as she thought, undignified manner might have struck Nehushta even in that brief interview. The idea that the princess was already deceiving her flashed across her mind. She smiled more tenderly than ever, with a little added air of sadness that gave her a wonderful charm.

"Yes, the Great King is very gracious to the ladies of the court," she said. "You are so beautiful and so different from them all that he will certainly talk long with you after the banquet this evening—when he has drunk much wine." The last words were added with a most especial sweetness of tone.

Nehushta's face flushed a little and she drank more sherbet before she answered. Then, letting her soft dark eyes rest, as though in admiration, upon the queen's face, she spoke in a tone of gentle deprecation:

"*Shall a man prefer the darkness of night to the glories of risen day?*
Or shall a man turn from the lilies to pluck the lowly flower of the field?"

"You know our poets, too?" exclaimed Atossa, pleased with the graceful tone of the compliment, but still looking at Nehushta with curious eyes. There was a self-possession about the Hebrew princess that she did not like; it was as though some one had suddenly taken a quality of her own and made it theirs and displayed it before her eyes. There was indeed this difference, that while Atossa's calm and undisturbed manner was generally real, Nehushta's was assumed, and she herself felt that, at any moment, it might desert her at her utmost need.

"So you know our poets?" repeated the queen, and this time she laughed lightly. "Indeed I fear the king will talk to you more than ever, for he loves poetry. I daresay Zoroaster, too, has repeated many verses to you in the winter evenings at Ecbatana. He used to know endless poetry when he was a boy."

This time Nehushta looked at the queen, and wondered how she, who could not be more than two or three and twenty years old, although now married to her third husband, could speak of having known Zoroaster as a boy, seeing that he was past thirty years of age. She turned the question upon the queen.

"You must have seen Zoroaster very often before he left Shushan," she said. "You know him so well."

"Yes—every one knew him. He was the favourite of the court, with his beauty and his courage and his strange affection for that old—for the old Hebrew prophet. That is why Cambyses sent them both away," added she with a

light laugh. "They were far too good, both of them, to be endured among the doings of those times."

Atossa spoke readily enough of Cambyses. Nehushta wondered whether she could be induced to speak of Smerdis. Her supposed ignorance of the true nature of what had occurred in the last few months would permit her to speak of the dead usurper with impunity.

"I suppose there have been great changes lately in the manners of the court—during this last year," suggested Nehushta carelessly. She pulled a raisin from the dry stem, and tried to peel it with her delicate fingers.

"Indeed there have been changes," answered Atossa, calmly. "A great many things that used to be tolerated will never be heard of now. On the whole, the change has been rather in relation to religion than otherwise. You will understand that in one year we have had three court religions. Cambyses sacrificed to Ashtaroth—and I must say he made a most appropriate choice

of his tutelary goddess. Smerdis"—continued the queen in measured tones and with the utmost calmness of manner—"Smerdis devoted himself wholly to the worship of Indrá, who appeared to be a convenient association of all the most agreeable gods; and the Great King now rules the earth by the grace of Auramazda. I, for my part, have always inclined to the Hebrew conception of one God—perhaps that is much the same as Auramazda, the All-Wise. What do you think?"

Nehushta smiled at the deft way in which the queen avoided speaking of Smerdis by turning the conversation again to religious topics. But fearing another lecture on the comparative merits of idolatry, human sacrifice, and monotheism, she manifested very little interest in the subject.

"I daresay it is the same. Zoroaster always says so, and that was the one point that Daniel could never forgive him. The sun is coming through those plants upon your head—shall we not have our cushions moved into the shade at

the other end?" She clapped her hands and rose languidly, offering her hand to Atossa. But the queen sprang lightly to her feet.

"I have stayed too long," she said. "Come with me, dearest princess, and we will go out into the orange gardens upon the upper terrace. Perhaps," she added, adjusting the folds of her mantle, "we shall find Zoroaster there, or some of the princes, or even the Great King himself. Or, perhaps, it would amuse you to see where I live?"

Nehushta received her mantle from her slaves, and one of them brought her a linen tiara in place of the gauze veil she had twisted about her hair. But Atossa would not permit the change.

"It is too beautiful!" she cried enthusiastically. "So new! you must really not change it."

She put her arm around Nehushta affectionately and led her towards the door of the inner staircase. Then suddenly she paused, as though recollecting herself.

"No," she said, "I will show you the way I

came. It is shorter and you should know it. It may be of use to you."

So they left the balcony by the little door that was almost masked by one of the great pillars, and descended the dark stairs. Nehushta detested every sort of bodily inconvenience, and inwardly wished the queen had not changed her mind, but had led her by an easier way.

"It is not far," said the queen, descending rapidly in front of her.

"It is dreadfully steep," objected Nehushta, "and I can hardly see my way at all. How many steps are there?"

"Only a score more," answered the queen's voice, farther down. She seemed to be hurrying, but Nehushta had no intention of going any faster, and carefully groped her way. As she began to see a glimmer of light at the last turn of the winding stair, she heard loud voices in the corridor below. With the cautious instinct of her race, she paused and listened. The hard, quick tones of an angry man dominated the rest.

CHAPTER VIII.

ZOROASTER had sat for nearly an hour, his eyes fixed on the blue sky, his thoughts wandering in contemplation of things greater and higher than those of earth, when he was roused by the measured tread of armed men marching in a distant room. In an instant he stood up, his helmet on his head,—the whole force of military habit bringing him back suddenly to the world of reality. In a moment the same heavy curtain, from under which Atossa had issued two hours before, was drawn aside, and a double file of spearmen came out upon the balcony, ranging themselves to right and left with well-drilled precision. A moment more, and the king himself appeared, walking alone, in his armour and winged helmet, his left hand upon the hilt of his

sword, his splendid mantle hanging to the ground behind his shoulders. As he came between the soldiers, he walked more slowly, and his dark, deep-set eyes seemed to scan the bearing and accoutrements of each separate spearman. It was rarely indeed, in those early days of his power, that he laid aside his breastplate for the tunic, or his helmet for the tiara and royal crown. In his whole air and gait the character of the soldier dominated, and the look of the conqueror was already in his face.

Zoroaster strode forward a few paces, and stood still as the king caught sight of him, preparing to prostrate himself, according to the ancient custom. But Darius checked him by a gesture; turning half round, he dismissed the guard, who filed back through the door as they had come, and the curtain fell behind them.

"I like not these elaborate customs," said the king. "A simple salutation, the hand to the lips and forehead—it is quite enough. A man might win a battle if he had all the time that it

takes him to fall down at my feet and rise up again, twenty times in a day."

As the king's speech seemed to require no answer, Zoroaster stood silently waiting for his orders. Darius walked to the balustrade and stood in the full glare of the sun for a moment, looking out. Then he came back again.

"The town seems to be quiet this morning," he said. "How long did the queen tarry here talking with thee, Zoroaster?"

"The queen talked with her servant for the space of half an hour," answered Zoroaster, without hesitation, though he was astonished at the suddenness and directness of the question.

"She is gone to see thy princess," continued the king.

"The queen told her servant it was yet too early to see Nehushta," remarked the warrior.

"She is gone to see her, nevertheless," asserted Darius, in a tone of conviction. "Now, it stands in reason that when the most beautiful woman in the world has been told that another woman

is come who is more beautiful than she, she will not lose a moment in seeing her." He eyed Zoroaster curiously for a moment, and his thick black beard did not altogether hide the smile on his face. "Come," he added, "we shall find the two together."

The king led the way and Zoroaster gravely followed. They passed down the staircase by which the queen had gone, and entering the low passage, came to the small door which she had bolted behind her with so much difficulty. The king pushed his weight against it, but it was still fastened.

"Thou art stronger than I, Zoroaster," said he, with a deep laugh. "Open this door."

The young warrior pushed heavily against the planks, and felt that one of them yielded. Then, standing back, he dealt a heavy blow on the spot with his clenched fist; a second, and the plank broke in. He put his arm through the aperture, and easily slipped the bolt back, and the door flew open. The blood streamed from his hand.

"That is well done," said Darius as he entered. His quick eye saw something white upon the stone bench in the dusky corner by the door. He stooped and picked it up quickly. It was the sealed scroll Atossa had left there when she needed both her hands to draw the bolt. Darius took it to one of the narrow windows, looked at it curiously and broke the seal. Zoroaster stood near and wiped the blood from his bruised knuckle.

The contents of the scroll were short. It was addressed to one Phraortes, of Ecbatana in Media, and contained the information that the Great King had returned in triumph from Babylon, having subdued the rebels and slain many thousands in two battles. Furthermore, that the said Phraortes should give instant information of the queen's affairs, and do nothing in regard to them until further intimation arrived.

The king stood a moment in deep thought. Then he walked slowly down the corridor, holding the scroll loose in his hand. Just at that in-

stant Atossa emerged from the dark staircase, and as she found herself face to face with Darius, she uttered an exclamation and stood still.

"This is a very convenient place for our interview," said Darius quietly. "No one can hear us. Therefore speak the truth at once." He held up the scroll to her eyes.

Atossa's ready wit did not desert her, nor did she change colour, though she knew her life was in the balance with her words. She laughed lightly as she spoke:

"I came down the stairs this morning——"

"To see the most beautiful woman in the world," interrupted Darius, raising his voice. "You have seen her. I am glad of it. Why did you bolt the door of the passage?"

"Because I thought it unfitting that the passage to the women's apartments should be left open when so many in the palace know the way," she answered readily enough.

"Where were you taking this letter when you left it at the door?" asked the king, beginning

to doubt whether there were anything wrong after all.

"I was about to send it to Ecbatana," answered Atossa with perfect simplicity.

"Who is this Phraortes?"

"He is the governor of the lands my father gave me for my own in Media. I wrote him to tell him of the Great King's victory, and that he should send me information concerning my affairs, and do nothing further until he hears from me."

"Why not?"

"Because I thought it possible that the Great King would spend the summer in Ecbatana, and that I should therefore be there myself to give my own directions. I forgot the letter because I had to take both hands to draw the bolt, and I was coming back to get it. Nehushta the princess is with me—she is now upon the staircase."

The king looked thoughtfully at his wife's beautiful face.

"You have evidently spoken the truth," he said slowly. "But it is not always easy to

understand what your truth signifies. I often think it would be much wiser to strangle you. Say you that Nehushta is near? Call her, then. Why does she tarry?"

In truth Nehushta had trembled as she crouched upon the stairs, not knowing whether to descend or to fly up the steps again. As she heard the queen pronounce her name, however, she judged it prudent to seem to have been out of earshot, and with quick, soft steps, she went up till she came to the lighted part, and there she waited.

"Let the Great King go himself and find her," said Atossa proudly, "if he doubts me any further." She stood aside to let him pass. But Darius beckoned to Zoroaster to go. He had remained standing at some distance, an unwilling witness to the royal altercation that had taken place before him; but as he passed the queen, she gave him a glance of imploring sadness, as though beseeching his sympathy in what she was made to suffer. He ran quickly up the steps in spite of the darkness, and found Nehushta waiting by

the window higher up. She started as he appeared, for he was the person she least expected. But he took her quickly in his arms, and kissed her passionately twice.

"Come quickly, my beloved," he whispered. "The king waits below."

"I heard his voice—and then I fled," she whispered hurriedly; and they began to descend again. "I hate her—I knew I should," she whispered, as she leaned upon his arm. So they emerged into the corridor, and met Darius waiting for them. The queen was nowhere to be seen, and the door at the farther extremity of the narrow way was wide open.

The king was as calm as though nothing had occurred; he still held the open letter in his hand as Nehushta entered the passage, and bowed herself before him. He took her hand for a moment, and then dropped it; but his eyes flashed suddenly and his arm trembled at her touch.

"Thou hadst almost lost thy way," he said. "The palace is large and the passages are many

and devious. Come now, I will lead thee to the gardens. There thou canst find friends among the queen's noble women, and amusements of many kinds. Let thy heart delight in the beauty of Shushan, and if there is anything that thou desirest, ask and I will give it thee."

Nehushta bent her head in thanks. The only thing she desired was to be alone for half an hour with Zoroaster; and that seemed difficult.

"Thy servant desireth what is pleasant in thy sight," she answered. And so they left the passage by the open door, and the king himself conducted Nehushta to the entrance of the garden, and bade the slave-woman who met them to lead her to the pavilion where the ladies of the palace spent the day in the warm summer weather. Zoroaster knew that whatever liberty his singular position allowed him in the quarter of the building where the king himself lived, he was not privileged to enter that place which was set apart for the noble ladies. Darius hated to be always surrounded by guards and slaves, and the

terraces and staircases of his dwelling were generally totally deserted,—only small detachments of spearmen guarding jealously the main entrances. But the remainder of the palace swarmed with the gorgeously dressed retinue of the court, with slaves of every colour and degree, from the mute smooth-faced Ethiopian to the accomplished Hebrew scribes of the great nobles; from the black and scantily-clad fan-girls to the dainty Greek tire-women of the queen's toilet, who loitered near the carved marble fountain at the entrance to the gardens; and in the outer courts, detachments of the horsemen of the guard rubbed their weapons, or reddened their broad leather bridles and trappings with red chalk, or groomed the horse of some lately arrived officer or messenger, or hung about and basked in the sun, with no clothing but their short-sleeved linen tunics and breeches, discussing the affairs of the nation with the certainty of decision peculiar to all soldiers, high and low. There was only room for a squadron of horse in the palace; but though

they were few, they were the picked men of the guard, and every one of them felt himself as justly entitled to an opinion concerning the position of the new king, as though he were at least a general.

But Darius allowed no gossiping slaves nor wrangling soldiers in his own dwelling. There all was silent and apparently deserted, and thither he led Zoroaster again. The young warrior was astonished at the way in which the king moved about unattended, as carelessly as though he were a mere soldier himself; he was not yet accustomed to the restless independence of character, to the unceasing activity and perfect personal fearlessness of the young Darius. It was hard to realise that this simple, hard-handed, outspoken man was the Great King, and occupied the throne of the magnificent and stately Cyrus, who never stirred abroad without the full state of the court about him; or that he reigned in the stead of the luxurious Cambyses, who feared to tread upon uncovered marble, or to expose himself to

the draught of a staircase; and who, after seven years of caring for his body, had destroyed himself in a fit of impotent passion. Darius succeeded to the throne of Persia as a lion coming into the place of jackals, as an eagle into a nest of crows and carrion birds—untiring, violent, relentless and brave. "Knowest thou one Phraortes, of Ecbatana?" the king asked suddenly when he was alone with Zoroaster.

"I know him," answered the prince. "A man rich and powerful, full of vanity as a peacock, and of wiles like a serpent. Not noble. He is the son of a fish-vendor, grown rich by selling salted sturgeons in the market-place. He is also the overseer of the queen's farmlands in Media, and of the Great King's horse-breeding stables."

"Go forth and bring him to me," said the king shortly. Without a word, Zoroaster made a brief salute and turned upon his heel to go. But it was as though a man had thrust him through with a knife. The king gazed after him in admiration of his magnificent obedience.

"Stay!" he called out. "How long wilt thou be gone?"

Zoroaster turned sharply round in military fashion, as he answered:

"It is a hundred and fifty farsangs[1] to Ecbatana. By the king's relays I can ride there in six days, and I can bring back Phraortes in six days more—if he die not of the riding," he added, with a grim smile.

"Is he old, or young? Fat, or meagre?" asked the king, laughing.

"He is a man of forty years, neither thin nor fat—a good horseman in his way, but not as we are."

"Bind him to his horse if he falls off from weariness. And tell him he is summoned to appear before me. Tell him the business brooks no delay. Auramazda be with thee and bring thee help. Go with speed."

Again Zoroaster turned and in a moment he

[1] Between five and six hundred English miles. South American postilions at the present day ride six hundred miles a week for a bare living.

was gone. He had sworn to be the king's faithful servant, and he would keep his oath, cost what it might, though it was bitterness to him to leave Nehushta without a word. He bethought him as he hastily put on light garments for the journey, that he might send her a letter, and he wrote a few words upon a piece of parchment, and folded it together. As he passed by the entrance of the garden on his way to the stables, he looked about for one of Nehushta's slaves; but seeing none, he beckoned to one of the Greek tirewomen, and giving her a piece of gold, bade her take the little scroll to Nehushta, the Hebrew princess, who was in the gardens. Then he went quickly on, and mounting the best horse in the king's stables, galloped at a break-neck pace down the steep incline. In five minutes he had crossed the bridge, and was speeding over the straight, dusty road toward Nineveh. In a quarter of an hour, a person watching him from the palace would have seen his flying figure disappearing as in a

tiny speck of dust far out upon the broad, green plain.

But the Greek slave-woman stood with Zoroaster's letter in her hand and held the gold piece he had given her in her mouth, debating what she should do. She was one of the queen's women, as it chanced, and she immediately reflected that she might turn the writing to some better account than by delivering it to Nehushta, whom she had seen for a moment that morning as she passed, and whose dark Hebrew face displeased the frivolous Greek, for some hidden reason. She thought of giving the scroll to the queen, but then she reflected that she did not know what it contained. The words were written hastily and in the Chaldean character. Their import might displease her mistress. The woman was not a newcomer, and she knew Zoroaster's face well enough from former times; she knew also, or suspected, that the queen secretly loved him, and she argued from the fact of Zoroaster, who was dressed for a journey, sending so hastily

a word to Nehushta, that he loved the Hebrew princess. Therefore, if the letter were a mere love greeting, with no name written in it, the queen might apply it to herself, and she would be pleased; whereas, if it were in any way clear that the writing was intended for Nehushta, the queen would certainly be glad that it should never be delivered. The result of this cunning argument was that the Greek woman thrust the letter into her bosom, and the gold piece into her girdle; and went to seek an opportunity of seeing the queen alone.

That day, towards evening, Atossa sat in an inner chamber before her great mirror; the table was covered with jade boxes, silver combs, bowls of golden hairpins, little ivory instruments, and all the appurtenances of her toilet. Two or three magnificent jewels lay among the many articles of use, gleaming in the reflected light of the two tall lamps that stood on bronze stands beside her chair. She was fully attired and had dismissed her women; but she lingered a moment, poring

over the little parchment scroll her chief hair-dresser had slipped into her hand when they were alone for a moment. Only a black fan-girl stood a few paces behind her, and resting the stem of the long palm against one foot thrust forward, swung the broad round leaf quickly from side to side at arm's length, sending a constant stream of fresh air upon her royal mistress, just below the level of the lamps which burned steadily above.

The queen turned the small letter again in her hand, and smiled to herself as she looked into the great burnished sheet of silver that surmounted the table. With some difficulty she had mastered the contents, for she knew enough of Hebrew and of the Chaldean character to comprehend the few simple words.

"I go hence for twelve days upon the king's business. My beloved, my soul is with thy soul and my heart with thy heart. As the dove that goeth forth in the morning and returneth in the evening to his mate, so I will return soon to thee."

Atossa knew well enough that the letter had

been intended for Nehushta. The woman had whispered that Zoroaster had given it to her, and Zoroaster would never have written those words to herself; or, writing anything, would not have written in the Hebrew language.

But as the queen read, her heart rose up in wrath against the Persian prince and against the woman he loved. When she had talked with him that morning, she had felt her old yearning affection rising again in her breast. She had wondered at herself, being accustomed to think that she was beyond all feeling for man, and the impression she had received from her half-hour's talk with him was so strong, that she had foolishly delayed sending her letter to Phraortes, in order to see the woman Zoroaster admired, and had, in her absence of mind, forgotten the scroll upon the seat in the corridor, and had brought herself into such desperate danger through the discovery of the missive, that she hardly yet felt safe. The king had dismissed her peremptorily from his presence while he waited for

Nehushta, and she had not seen him during the rest of the day. As for Zoroaster, she had soon heard from her women that he had taken the road towards Nineveh before noon, alone and almost unarmed, mounted upon one of the fleetest horses in Persia. She had not a doubt that Darius had despatched him at once to Ecbatana to meet Phraortes, or at least to inquire into the state of affairs in the city. She knew that no one could outride Zoroaster, and that there was nothing to be done but to await the issue. It was not possible to send a word of warning to her agent—he must inevitably take his chance, and if his conduct attracted suspicion, he would, in all probability, be at once put to death. She believed that, even in that event, she could easily clear herself; but she resolved, if possible, to warn him as soon as he reached Shushan, or even to induce the king to be absent from the palace for a few days at the time when Phraortes might be expected. There was plenty of time —at least eleven days.

Meanwhile, a desperate struggle was beginning within her, and the letter her woman had brought her hastened the conclusion to which her thoughts were rapidly tending.

She felt keenly the fact that Zoroaster, who had been so cold to her advances in former days, had preferred before her a Hebrew woman, and was now actually so deeply in love with Nehushta, that he could not leave the palace for a few days without writing her a word of love—he, who had never loved any one! She fiercely hated this dark woman, who was preferred before her by the man she secretly loved, and whom the king had brutally declared to be the most beautiful woman in the world. She longed for her destruction as she had never longed for anything in her life. Her whole soul rose in bitter resentment; not only did Zoroaster love this black-eyed, dark-browed child of captivity, but the king, who had always maintained that Atossa was unequalled in the world, even when he coldly informed her that he would never trust

her, now dared to say before Zoroaster, almost before Nehushta herself, that the princess was the more beautiful of the two. The one man wounded her in her vanity, the other in her heart.

It would not be possible at present to be revenged upon the king. There was little chance of eluding his sleepless vigilance, or of leading him into any rash act of self-destruction. Besides, she knew him too well not to understand that he was the only man alive who could save Persia from further revolutions, and keep the throne against all comers. She loved power and the splendour of her royal existence, perhaps more than she loved Zoroaster. The idea of another change in the monarchy was not to be thought of, now that Darius had subdued Babylon. She had indeed a half-concerted plan with Phraortes to seize the power in Media in case the king were defeated in Babylonia, and the scroll she had so imprudently forgotten that very morning was merely an order to lay aside all such plans

for the present, since the king had returned in triumph.

As far as her conscience was concerned, Atossa would as soon have overthrown and murdered the king to gratify the personal anger she felt against him at the present moment, as she would have wrecked the universe to possess a jewel she fancied. There existed in her mind no idea of proportion between the gratification of her passions and the means she might employ thereto; provided one gratification did not interfere with another which she always saw beyond. Nothing startled her on account of its mere magnitude; no plan was rejected by her merely because it implied ruin to a countless number of human beings who were useless to her. She coldly calculated the amount of satisfaction she could at any time obtain for her wishes and desires, so as not to prejudice the gratification of all the possible passions she might hereafter experience.

As for injuring Zoroaster, she would not have thought of it. She loved him in a way peculiar

to herself, but it was love, nevertheless,—and she had no idea of wreaking her disappointment upon the object on which she had set her heart. As a logical consequence, she determined to turn all her anger against Nehushta, and she pictured to herself the delicious pleasure of torturing the young princess's jealousy to desperation. To convince Nehushta that Zoroaster was deceiving her, and really loved herself, the queen; to force Zoroaster into some position where he must either silently let Nehushta believe that he was attached to Atossa, or, as an alternative, betray the king's secrets by speaking the truth; to let Nehushta's vanity be flattered by the king's admiration,—nay, even to force her into a marriage with Darius, and then by suffering her again to fall into her first love for Zoroaster, bring her to a public disgrace by suddenly unmasking her to the king—to accomplish these things surely and quickly, reserving for herself the final delight of scoffing at her worsted rival—all this seemed to Atossa to constitute a plan at once worthy of

her profound and scheming intelligence, and most sweetly satisfactory to her injured vanity and rejected love.

It would be hard for her to see Nehushta married to the king, and occupying the position of chief favourite even for a time. But the triumph would be the sweeter when Nehushta was finally overthrown, and meanwhile there would be much daily delight in tormenting the princess's jealousy. Chance, or rather the cunning of her Greek tirewoman, had thrown a weapon in her way which could easily be turned into an instrument of torture, and as she sat before her mirror, she twisted and untwisted the little bit of parchment, and smiled to herself, a sweet bright smile—and leaned her head back to the pleasant breeze of the fan.

CHAPTER IX.

THE noonday air was hot and dry in the garden of the palace, but in the graceful marble pavilion there was coolness and the sound of gently plashing water. Rose-trees and climbing plants screened the sunlight from the long windows, and gave a soft green tinge to the eight-sided hall, where a fountain played in the midst, its little jet falling into a basin hollowed in the floor. On the rippling surface a few water-lilies swayed gently with the constant motion, anchored by their long stems to the bottom. All was cool and quiet and restful, and Nehushta stood looking at the fountain.

She was alone and very unhappy. Zoroaster had left the palace without a word to her, and she knew only by the vague reports her slaves

brought her, that he was gone for many days. Her heart sank at the thought of all that might happen before he returned, and the tears stood in her eyes.

"Are you here alone, dear princess?" said a soft, clear voice behind her. Nehushta started, as though something had stung her, as she recognised Atossa's tones. There was nothing of her assumed cordiality of the previous day as she answered. She was too unhappy, too weary of the thought that her lover was gone, to be able to act a part, or pretend a friendliness she did not feel.

"Yes—I am alone," she said quietly.

"So am I," answered Atossa, her blue eyes sparkling with the sunshine she brought in with her, and all her wonderful beauty beaming, as it were, with an overflowing happiness. "The ladies of the court are gone in state to the city, in the Great King's train, and you and I are alone in the palace. How deliciously cool it is in here."

She sat down upon a heap of cushions by one of the screened windows and contemplated Nehushta, who still stood by the fountain.

"You look sad—and tired, dearest Nehushta," said she presently. "Indeed you must not be sad here—nobody is sad here!"

"I am sad," repeated Nehushta, in a dreary, monotonous way, as though scarcely conscious of what she was saying. There was a moment's silence before Atossa spoke again.

"Tell me what it is," she said at last, in persuasive accents. "Tell me what is the matter. It may be that you lack something—that you miss something you were used to in Ecbatana. Will you not tell me, dearest?"

"Tell you what?" asked Nehushta, as though she had not heard.

"Tell me what it is that makes you sad," repeated the queen.

"Tell you?" exclaimed the princess, suddenly looking up, with flashing eyes, "tell *you?* oh no!"

Atossa looked a little sadly at Nehushta, as though hurt at the want of confidence she showed. But the Hebrew maiden turned away and went and looked through the hanging plants at the garden without. Then Atossa rose softly and came and stood behind her, and put her arm about her, and let her own fair cheek rest against the princess's dark face. Nehushta said nothing, but she trembled, as though something she hated were touching her.

"Is it because your friend has gone away suddenly?" asked Atossa almost in a whisper, with the sweetest accent of sympathy. Nehushta started a little.

"No!" she answered, almost fiercely. "Why do you say that?"

"Only—he wrote me a little word before he went. I thought you might like to know he was safe," replied the queen, gently pressing her arm about Nehushta's slender waist.

"Wrote to you?" repeated the princess, in angry surprise.

"Yes, dearest," answered the queen, looking down in well-feigned embarrassment. "I would not have told you, only I thought you would wish to hear of him. If you like, I will read you a part of what he says," she added, producing from her bosom the little piece of parchment carefully rolled together.

It was more than Nehushta could bear. Her olive skin turned suddenly pale, and she tore herself away from the queen.

"Oh no! no! I will not hear it! Leave me in peace—for your gods' sake, leave me in peace!"

Atossa drew herself up and stared coldly at Nehushta, as though she were surprised beyond measure and deeply offended.

"Truly, I need not to be told twice to leave you in peace," she said proudly. "I thought to comfort you, because I saw you were sad—even at the expense of my own feelings. I will leave you now—but I bear no malice against you. You are very, very young, and very, very foolish."

Atossa shook her head, thoughtfully, and swept

from the pavilion in stately and offended dignity. But as she walked alone through the garden, she smiled to herself and softly hummed a merry melody she had heard from an Egyptian actor on the previous evening. Darius had brought a company of Egyptians from Babylon, and after the banquet, had commanded that they should perform their music, and dancing, and mimicry, for the amusement of the assembled court.

Atossa's sweet voice echoed faintly among the orange trees and the roses, as she went towards the palace, and the sound of it came distantly to Nehushta's ears. She stood for a while where the queen had left her, her face pale and her hands wringing together; and then, with a sudden impulse, she went and threw herself upon the floor, and buried her head in the deep, soft cushions. Her hands wandered in the wealth of her black hair, and her quick, hot tears stained the delicate silk of the pillows.

How could he? How was it possible? He said he loved her, and now, when he was sent

away for many days, his only thought had been to write to the queen—not to herself! An agony of jealousy overwhelmed her, and she could have torn out her very soul, and trampled her own heart under her feet in her anger. Passionately she clasped her hands to her temples; her head seemed splitting with a new and dreadful pain that swallowed all her thoughts for a moment, until the cold weight seemed again to fall upon her breast and all her passion gushed out in abundant tears. Suddenly a thought struck her. She roused herself, leaning upon one hand, and stared vacantly a moment at her small gilded shoe which had fallen from her bare foot upon the marble pavement. She absently reached forward and took the thing in her hand, and gravely contemplated the delicate embroidery and thick gilding, through her tears,—as one will do a foolish and meaningless thing in the midst of a great sorrow.

Was it possible that the queen had deceived her? How she wished she had let her read the

writing as she had offered to do. She did not imagine at first that the letter was for herself and had gone astray. But she thought the queen might easily have pretended to have received something, or had even scratched a few words upon a bit of parchment, meaning to pass it off upon her as a letter from Zoroaster. She longed to possess the thing and to judge of it with her own eyes. It would hardly be possible to say whether it were written by him or not, as far as the handwriting was concerned; but Nehushta was sure she should recognise some word, some turn of language that would assure her that it was his. She could almost have risen and gone in search of the queen at once, to prove the lie upon her—to challenge her to show the writing. But her pride forbade her. She had been so weak—she should not have let Atossa see, even for a moment, that she was hurt, not even that she loved Zoroaster. She had tried to conceal her feelings, but Atossa had gone too far, had tortured her beyond all endurance, and she knew

that, even if she had known what to expect, she could not have easily borne the soft, infuriating, deadly, caressing, goading taunts of that fair, cruel woman.

Then again, the whole possibility of Zoroaster's unfaithfulness came and took shape before her. He had known and loved Atossa of old, perhaps, and now the old love had risen up and killed the new—he had sworn so truly under the ivory moonlight in Ecbatana. And yet—he had written to this other woman and not to her. Was it true? Was it Atossa's cruel lie? In a storm of doubt and furious passion, her tears welled forth again; and once more she hid her face in the pale yellow cushions, and her whole beautiful body trembled and was wrung with her sobs.

Suddenly she was aware that some one entered the little hall and stood beside her. She dared not look up at first; she was unstrung and wretched in her grief and anger, and it was the strong, firm tread of a man. The footsteps ceased, and the intruder, whoever he might be, was

standing still; she took courage and looked quickly up. It was the king himself. Indeed, she might have known that no other man would dare to penetrate into the recesses of the garden set apart for the ladies of the palace.

Darius stood quietly gazing at her with an expression of doubt and curiosity, that was almost amusing, on his stern, dark face. Nehushta was frightened, and sprang to her feet with the graceful quickness of a startled deer. She was indolent by nature, but as swift as light when she was roused by fear or excitement.

"Are you so unhappy in my palace?" asked Darius gently. "Why are you weeping? Who has hurt you?"

Nehushta turned her face away and dashed the tears from her eyes, while her cheeks flushed hotly.

"I am not weeping—no one—has hurt me," she answered, in a voice broken rather by embarrassment and annoyance, than by the sorrow she had nearly forgotten in her sudden astonishment at being face to face with the king.

Darius smiled, and almost laughed, as he stroked his thick beard with his broad brown hand.

"Princess," he said, "will you sit down again? I will deliver you a discourse upon the extreme folly of ever telling"—he hesitated—"of saying anything which is not precisely true."

There was something so simple and honest in his manner of speaking, that Nehushta almost smiled through her half-dried tears as she sat upon the cushions at the king's feet. He himself sat down upon the broad marble seat that ran round the eight-sided little building, and composing his face to a serious expression, that was more than half-assumed, began to deliver his lecture.

"I take it for granted that when one tells a lie, he expects to be believed. There must, then, be some thing or circumstance which can help to make his lies credible. Now, my dear princess, in the present instance, while I was looking you in the face and counting the tears upon your very

beautiful cheeks, you deliberately told me that you were not weeping. There was, therefore, not even the shadow of a thing, or circumstance which could make what you said credible. It is evident that what you said was not true. Is it not so?"

Nehushta could not help smiling as she looked up and saw the kindly light in the king's dark eyes. She thought she understood he was amusing her for the sake of giving her time to collect herself, and in spite of the determined intention of marrying her he had so lately expressed, she felt safe with him.

"The king lives for ever," she answered, in the set phrase of assent common at the court.

"It is very probable," replied Darius gravely. "So many people say so, that I should have to believe all mankind liars if that were not true. But I must return to your own particular case. It would have been easy for you not to have said what you did. I must therefore suppose that in going out of the way to make an attempt

to deceive me in the face of such evidence—by saying you were not weeping when the tears were actually falling from those very soft eyes of yours—you had an object to gain. Men employ truth and falsehood for much the same reason: A man who does not respect truth will, therefore, lie when he can hope to gain more by it. The man who lies expects to gain something by his lie, and the man who tells the truth hopes that, in so doing, he will establish himself a credit which he can use upon future occasions.[1] But the object is the same. Tell me, therefore, princess, what did you hope to gain by trying to deceive me?" Darius laughed as he concluded his argument and looked at Nehushta to see what she would say—Nehushta laughed also, she could hardly tell why. The king's brilliant, active humour was catching. She reached out and thrust her foot into the little slipper that still lay beside her, before she answered.

"What I said was true in one way and not

[1] Herodotus, book iii. chap. lxxii.

in another," she said. "I had been crying bitterly, but I stopped when I heard the king come and stand beside me. So it was only the tears the king saw and not the weeping. As for the object,"—she laughed a little,—"it was, perhaps, that I might gain time to dry my eyes."

Darius shifted his position a little.

"I know," he said gravely. "And I know why you were weeping, and it is my fault. Will you forgive me, princess? I am a hasty man, not accustomed to think twice when I give my commands."

Nehushta looked up suddenly with an expression of inquiry.

"I sent him away very quickly," continued the king. "If I had thought, I would have told him to come and bid you farewell. He would not have willingly gone without seeing you—it was my fault. He will return in twelve days."

Nehushta was silent and bit her lip as the bitter thought arose in her heart that it was not alone Zoroaster's sudden departure that had

pained her. Then it floated across her mind that the king had purposely sent away her lover in order that he might himself try to win her heart.

"Why did you send him—and not another?" she asked, without looking up, and forgetting all formality of speech.

"Because he is the man of all others whom I can trust, and I needed a faithful messenger," answered Darius, simply.

Nehushta gazed into the king's face searching for some sign there, but he had spoken earnestly enough.

"I thought——" she began, and then stopped short, blushing crimson.

"You thought," answered Darius, "that I had sent him away never to return because I desire you for my wife. It was natural, but it was unjust. I sent him because I was obliged to do so. If you wish it, I will leave you now, and I will promise you that I will not look upon your face till Zoroaster returns."

Nehushta looked down and she still blushed. She could hardly believe her ears.

"Indeed," she faltered, "it were perhaps—best —I mean——" she could not finish the sentence. Darius rose quietly from his seat:

"Farewell, princess; it shall be as you desire," he said gravely, and strode towards the door. His face was pale and his lips set tight.

Nehushta hesitated and then, in a moment, she comprehended the whole nobility of soul of the young king,—a man at whose words the whole land trembled, who crushed his enemies like empty egg-shells beneath his feet, and yet who, when he held the woman he loved completely in his power, refused, even for a moment, to intrude his presence upon her against her wish.

She sprang from her seat and ran to him, and kneeled on one knee and took his hand. He did not look at her, but his own hand trembled violently in hers, and he made as though he would lift her to her feet.

"Nay," she cried, "let not my lord be angry

with his handmaiden! Let the king grant me my request, for he is the king of men and of kings!" In her sudden emotion she spoke once more in the form of a humble subject addressing her sovereign.

"Speak, princess," answered Darius. "If it be possible, I will grant your request."

"I would——" she stopped, and again the generous blood overspread her dark cheek. "I would—I know not what I would, saving to thank thee for thy goodness and kindness—I was unhappy, and thou hast comforted me. I meant not that it was best that I should not look upon the king's face." She spoke the last words in so low a tone as she bent her head, that Darius could scarcely hear them. But his willing ears interpreted rightly what she said, and he understood.

"Shall I come to you to-morrow, princess, at the same hour?" he asked, almost humbly.

"Nay, the king knoweth that the garden is ever full of the women of the court," said

Nehushta, hesitating; for she thought that it would be a very different matter to be seen from a distance by all the ladies of the palace in conversation with the king.

"Do not fear," answered Darius. "The garden shall be yours. There are other bowers of roses in Shushan whither the women can go. None but you shall enter here, so long as it be your pleasure. Farewell, I will come to you to-morrow at noon."

He turned and looked into her eyes, and then she took his hand and silently placed it upon her forehead in thanks. In a moment he was gone and she could hear his quick tread upon the marble of the steps outside, and in the path through the roses. When she knew that he was out of sight, Nehushta went out and stood in the broad blaze of the noonday sun. She passed her hand over her forehead, as though she had been dazed. It seemed as though a change had come over her and she could not understand it.

In the glad security of being alone, she ran

swiftly down one of the paths, and across by another. Then she stopped short and bent down a great bough of blooming roses and buried her beautiful dark face in the sweet leaves and smelled the perfume, and laughed.

"Oh! I am so happy!" she cried aloud. But her face suddenly became grave, as she tried to understand what she felt. After all, Zoroaster was only gone for twelve days, and meanwhile she had secured her liberty, the freedom of wandering all day in the beautiful gardens, and she could dream of him to her heart's content. And the letter? It was a forgery, of course. That wicked queen loved Zoroaster and wished to make Nehushta give him up! Perhaps she might tell the king something of it when he came on the next day. He would be so royally angry! He would so hate the lie! And yet, in some way, it seemed to her that she could not tell Darius of this trouble. He had been so kind, so gentle, as though he had been her brother, instead of the Great King himself, who bore life

and death in his right hand and his left, whose shadow was a terror to the world already, and at whose brief, imperious word a nation rose to arms and victory. Was this the terrible Darius? The man who had slain the impostor with his own sword? who had vanquished rebel Babylon in a few days and brought home four thousand captives at his back? He was as gentle as a girl, this savage warrior—but when she recalled his features, she remembered the stern look that came into his face when he was serious, she grew thoughtful and wandered slowly down the path, biting a rose-leaf delicately with her small white teeth and thinking many things; most of all, how she might be revenged upon Atossa for what she had suffered that morning.

But Atossa herself was enjoying at that very moment the triumph of the morning and quietly planning how she might continue the torment she had imagined for Nehushta, without allowing its cruelty to diminish, while keeping herself amused and occupied to the fullest extent until Zoroaster

should return. It was not long before she learned from her chief tirewoman that the king had been in the pavilion of the garden with Nehushta that morning, and it at once occurred to her that, if the king returned on the following day, it would be an easy thing to appear while he was with the princess, and by veiled words and allusions to Zoroaster, to make her rival suffer the most excruciating torments, which she would be forced to conceal from the king.

But, at the same time, the news gave her cause for serious thought. She had certainly not intended that Nehushta should be left alone for hours with Darius. She knew indeed that the princess loved Zoroaster, but she could not conceive that any woman should be insensible to the consolation the Great King could offer. If affairs took such a turn, she fully intended to allow the king to marry Nehushta, while she confidently believed it in her power to destroy her just when she had reached the summit of her ambition.

It chanced that the king chose that day to eat his evening meal in the sole company of Atossa, as he sometimes did when weary of the court ceremony. When, therefore, they reclined at sundown upon a small secluded terrace of the upper story, Atossa found an excellent opportunity of discussing Nehushta and her doings.

Darius lay upon a couch on one side of the low table, and Atossa was opposite to him. The air was dry and intensely hot, and on each side two black fan-girls plied their palm-leaves silently with all their might. The king lay back upon his cushions, his head uncovered, and all his shaggy curls of black hair tossed behind him, his broad, strong hand circling a plain goblet of gold that stood beside him on the table. For once, he had laid aside his breastplate, and a vest of white and purple fell loosely over his tunic; but his sword of keen Indian steel lay within reach upon the floor.

Atossa had raised herself upon her elbow, and her clear blue eyes were fixed upon the king's

face, thoughtfully, as though expecting that he would say something. Contrary to all custom, she wore a Greek tunic with short sleeves caught at the shoulders by golden buckles, and her fair hair was gathered into a heavy knot, low down, behind her head. Her dazzling arms and throat were bare, but above her right elbow she wore a thick twisted snake of gold, her only ornament.

"The king is not athirst to-night," said Atossa at last, watching the full goblet that he grasped, but did not raise.

"I am not always thirsty," answered Darius moodily. "Would you have me always drunk, like a Babylonian dog?"

"No; nor always sober, like a Persian captain."

"What Persian captain?" asked the king, suddenly looking at her and knitting his brows.

"Why, like him, whom, for his sobriety you have sent to-day on the way to Nineveh," answered Atossa.

"I have sent no one to Nineveh to-day."

"To Ecbatana then, to inquire whether I told

you the truth about my poor servant Phraortes—Fravartish, as you call him," said the queen, with a flash of spite in her blue eyes.

"I assure you," answered the king, laughing, "that it is solely on account of your remarkable beauty that I have not had you strangled. So soon as you grow ugly you shall surely die. It is very unwise of me, as it is!"

The queen, too, laughed, a low, silvery laugh.

"I am greatly indebted for my life," said she. "I am very beautiful, I am aware, but I am no longer the most beautiful woman in the world." She spoke without a trace of annoyance in her voice or face, as though it were a good jest.

"No," said Darius, thoughtfully. "I used to think that you were. It is in the nature of man to change his opinion. You are, nevertheless, very beautiful—I admire your Greek dress."

"Shall I send my tirewoman with one like it to Nehushta?" inquired Atossa, raising her delicate eyebrows, with a sweet smile.

"You will not need to improve her appearance

in order that she may find favour in my eyes," answered Darius, laughing. "But the jest is good. You would rather send her an Indian snake than an ornament."

"Yes," returned the queen, who understood the king's strange character better than any one. "You cannot in honesty expect me not to hate a woman whom you think more beautiful than me! It would hardly be natural. It is unfortunate that she should prefer the sober Persian captain to the king himself."

"It is unfortunate—yes—fortunate for you, however."

"I mean, it will chafe sadly upon you when you have married her," said Atossa, calmly.

Darius raised the goblet he still held and setting it to his lips drank it at a draught. As he replaced it on the table, Atossa rose swiftly, and with her own hands refilled it from a golden ewer. The wine was of Shiraz, dark and sweet and strong. The king took her small white hand in his, as she stood beside him, and looked at it.

"It is a beautiful hand," he said. "Nehushta's fingers are a trifle shorter than yours—a little more pointed—a little less grasping. Shall I marry Nehushta, or not?" He looked up as he asked the question, and he laughed.

"No," answered Atossa, laughing too.

"Shall I marry her to Zoroaster?"

"No," she answered again, but her laugh was less natural.

"What shall I do with her?" asked the king.

"Strangle her!" replied Atossa, with a little fierce pressure on his hand as he held hers, and without the least hesitation.

"There would be frequent sudden deaths in Persia, if you were king," said Darius.

"It seems to me there are enough slain, as it is," answered the queen. "There are, perhaps, one—or two——"

Suddenly the king's face grew grave, and he dropped her hand.

"Look you!" he said, "I love jesting. But jest not overmuch with me. Do no harm to

Nehushta, or I will make an end of your jesting for ever, by sure means. That white throat of yours would look ill with a bow-string about it."

The queen bit her lip. The king seldom spoke to her in earnest, and she was frightened.

On the following day, when she went to the garden, two tall spearmen guarded the entrance, and as she was about to go in, they crossed their lances over the marble door and silently barred the way.

CHAPTER X.

ATOSSA started back in pure astonishment and stared for a moment at the two guards, looking from one to the other, and trying to read their stolid faces. Then she laid her hand on their spears, and would have pushed them aside; but she could not.

"Whose hounds are ye?" she said angrily. "Know ye not the queen? Make way!"

But the two strong soldiers neither answered nor removed their weapons from before the door.

"Dog-faced slaves!" she said between her teeth. "I will crucify you both before sundown!" She turned and went away, but she was glad that no one was there in the narrow vestibule before the garden to see her discomfiture. It was the first time in her life she had ever been resisted by an inferior, and she could not bear it

easily. But when she discovered, half an hour later, that the guards were obeying the Great King's orders, she bowed her head silently and went to her apartments to consider what she should do.

She could do nothing. There was no appeal against the king's word. He had distinctly commanded that no one save Nehushta, not even Atossa herself, was to be allowed to enter; he had placed the guards there himself the previous day, and had himself given the order.

For eleven days the door was barred; but Atossa did not again attempt to enter. Darius would have visited roughly such an offence, and she knew how delicate her position was. She resigned herself and occupied her mind with other things. Daily, an hour before noon, Nehushta swept proudly through the gate, and disappeared among the roses and myrtles of the garden; and daily, precisely as the sun reached the meridian, the king went in between the spearmen, and disappeared in like manner.

Darius had grown so suddenly stern and cold in manner towards the queen, that she dared not even mention the subject of the garden to him, fearing a sudden outburst of his anger, which would surely put an end to her existence in the court, and very likely to her life.

As for Nehushta, she had plentiful cause for reflection and much time for dreaming. If the days were not happy, they were at least made bearable for her by the absolute liberty she enjoyed. The king would have given her slaves and jewels and rich gifts without end, had she been willing to accept them. She said she had all she needed —and she said it a little proudly; only the king's visits grew to be the centre of the day, and each day the visit lengthened, till it came to be nearly evening when Darius issued from the gate.

She always waited for him in the eight-sided pavilion, and as their familiarity grew, the king would not even permit her to rise when he came, nor to use any of those forms of the court speech which were so distasteful to him. He simply sat

himself down beside her, and talked to her and listened to her answers, as though he were one of his own subjects, no more hampered by the cares and state of royalty than any soldier in the kingdom.

It was a week since Zoroaster had mounted to ride to Ecbatana, and Darius sat as usual upon the marble bench by the side of Nehushta, who rested among the cushions, talking now without constraint upon all matters that chanced to occur as subjects of conversation. She thought Darius was more silent than usual, and his dark face was pale. He seemed weary, as though from some great struggle, and presently Nehushta stopped speaking and waited to see whether the king would say anything.

During the silence nothing was heard saving the plash of the little fountain, and the low soft ripple of the tiny waves that rocked themselves against the edge of the basin.

"Do you know, Nehushta," he said at last, in a weary voice, "that I am doing one of the worst actions of my life?"

Nehushta started, and the shadows in her face grew darker.

"Say rather the kindest action you ever did," she murmured.

"If it is not bad, it is foolish," said Darius, resting his chin upon his hand and leaning forward. "I would rather it were foolish than bad—I fear me it is both."

Nehushta could guess well enough what it was he would say. She knew she could have turned the subject, or laughed, or interrupted him in many ways; but she did none of these things. An indescribable longing seized her to hear him say that he loved her. What could it matter? He was so loyal and good that he could never be more than a friend. He was the king of the world—had he not been honest and kind, he would have needed no wooing to do as he pleased to do, utterly and entirely. A word from his lips and the name of Zoroaster would be but the memory of a man dead; and again a word, and Nehushta would be the king's wife! What

need had he of concealment, or of devious ways? He was the king of the earth, whose shadow was life and death, whose slightest wish was a law to be enforced by hundreds of thousands of warriors! There was nothing between him and his desires—nothing but that inborn justice and truth, in which he so royally believed. Nehushta felt that she could trust him, and she longed—out of mere curiosity, she thought—to hear him speak words of love to her. It would only be for a moment—they would be so soon spoken; and at her desire, he would surely not speak them again. It seemed so sweet, she knew not why, to make this giant of despotic power do as she pleased; to feel that she could check him, or let him speak—him whom all obeyed and feared, as they feared death itself.

She looked up quietly, as she answered:

"How can it be either bad or foolish of you to make others so happy?"

"It seems as though it could be neither—and yet, all my reason tells me it is both," replied

the king earnestly. "Here I sit beside you, day after day, deceiving myself with the thought that I am making your time pass pleasantly till——"

"There is not any deception in that," interrupted Nehushta gently. Somehow she did not wish him to pronounce Zoroaster's name. "I can never tell you how grateful I am——"

"It is I who am grateful," interrupted the king in his turn. "It is I who am grateful that I am allowed to be daily with you, and that you speak with me, and seem glad when I come——" He hesitated and stopped.

"What is there that is bad and foolish in that?" asked Nehushta, with a sudden smile, as she looked up into his face.

"There is more than I like to think," answered the king. "You say the time passes pleasantly for you. Do you think it is less pleasant for me?" His voice sank to a deep, soft tone, as he continued: "I sit here day after day, and day after day I love you more and more. I love you —where is the use of concealing that—if I could

conceal it? You know it. Perhaps you pity me, for you do not love me. You pity me who hold the whole earth under my feet, forsooth, as an Egyptian juggler stands upon a ball, and rolls it whither he will." He ceased suddenly.

"Indeed I would that you did not love me," said Nehushta very gravely. She looked down. The pleasure of hearing the king's words was indeed exquisite, and she feared that her eyes might betray her. But she did not love him. She wondered what he would say next.

"You might as well wish that dry pastures should not burn when the sun shines on them, and there is no rain," he answered with a passing bitterness. "It is at least a satisfaction that my love does not harm you—that you are willing to have me for your friend——"

"Willing! Your friendship is almost the sweetest thing I know," exclaimed the princess. The king's eyes flashed darkly.

"Almost! Yes, truly—my friendship and another man's love are the sweetest things!

What would my friendship be without his love? By Auramazda and the six Amshaspands of Heaven, I would it were my love and his friendship! I would that Zoroaster were the king, and I Zoroaster, the king's servant! I would give all Persia and Media, Babylon and Egypt, and all the uttermost parts of my kingdom, to hear your sweet voice say: 'Darius, I love thee!' I would give my right hand, I would give my heart from my breast and my soul from my body—my life and my strength, and my glory and my kingdom would I give to hear you say: 'Come, my beloved, and put thine arms about me!' Ah, child! you know not what my love is—how it is higher than the heavens in worshipping you, and broader than the earth to be filled with you, and deeper than the depths of the sea, to change not, but to abide for you always."

The king's voice was strong, and the power of his words found wings in it, and seemed to fly forth irresistibly with a message that demanded an answer. Nehushta regretted within herself

that she had let him speak—but for all the world she could not have given up the possession of the words he had spoken. She covered her eyes with one hand and remained silent—for she could say nothing. A new emotion had got possession of her, and seemed to close her lips.

"You are silent," continued the king. "You are right. What should you answer me? My voice sounds like the raving of a madman, chained by a chain that he cannot break. If I had the strength of the mountains, I could not move you. I know it. All things I have but this—this love of yours that you have given to another. I would I had it! I should have the strength to surpass the deeds of men, had I your love! Who is this whom you love? A captain? A warrior? I tell you because you have so honoured him, so raised him upon the throne of your heart, I will honour him too, and I will raise him above all men, and all the nation shall bow before him. I will make a decree that he shall be worshipped as a god—this man whom

you have made a god of by your love. I will build a great temple for you two, and I will go up with all the people, and fall down and bow before you, and worship you, and love you with every sinew and bone of my body, and with every hope and joy and sorrow of my soul. He whom you love shall ask, and whatsoever he asks I will give to him and to you. There shall not be anything left in the whole world that you desire, but I will give it to you. Am I not the king of the whole earth—the king of all living things but you?"

Darius breathed savagely hard through his clenched teeth, and rising suddenly, paced the pavement between Nehushta and the fountain. She was silent still, overcome with a sort of terror at his words—words, every one of which he was able to fulfil, if he so chose. Presently he stood still before her.

"Said I not well, that I rave as a madman—that I speak as a fool without understanding? What can I give you that you want? Or what

thing can I devise that you have need of? Have you not all that the world holds for mortal woman and living man? Do you not love, and are you not loved in return? Have you not all —all—all? Ah! woe is me that I am lord over the nations, and have not a drop of the waters of peace wherewith to quench the thirst of my tormented soul! Woe is me that I rule the world and trample the whole earth beneath my feet, and cannot have the one thing that all the earth holds which is good! Woe is me, Nehushta, that you have cruelly stolen my peace from me, and I find it not—nor shall find it for evermore!"

The strong dark man stood wringing his hands together; his face was pale as the dead, his black eyes were blazing with a mad fire. Nehushta dared not look on the tempest she had roused, but she trembled and clasped her hands to her breast and looked down.

"Nay, you are right," he cried bitterly. "Answer me nothing, for you can have nothing to answer! Is it your fault that I am mad? Or

is it your doing that I love you so? Has any one sinned in this? I have seen you—I saw you for a brief moment standing in the door of your tent—and seeing, I loved you, and love you, and shall love you till the heavens are rolled together and the scroll of all death is full! There is nothing, nothing that you can say or do. It is not your fault—it is not your sin; but it is by you and through you that I am undone,—broken as the tree in the storm of the mountains, burned up and parched as the beast perishing in the sun of the desert for lack of water, torn asunder and rent into pieces as the rope that breaks at the well! By you, and for you, and through you, I am ruined and lost—lost—lost for ever in the hell of my wretched greatness, in the immeasurable death of my own horrible despair!"

With a wild movement of agony, Darius fell at Nehushta's feet, prostrate upon the marble floor, and buried his face in the skirts of her mantle, utterly over-mastered and broken down by the tumult of his passion.

Nehushta was not heartless. Of a certainty she would have pitied any one in such distress and grief, even had the cause thereof come less near to herself. But, in all the sudden emotion she felt, the pity, the fear, and the self-reproach, there was joined a vague feeling that no man ever spoke as this man, that no lover ever poured forth such abundant love before, and in the dim suspicion of something greater than she had ever known, her fear and her pity grew stronger, and strove with each other.

At first she could not speak, but she put forth her delicate hand and laid it tenderly on the king's thick black hair, as gently as a mother might soothe a passionate child; and he suffered it to rest there. And presently she raised his head and laid it in her lap, and smoothed his forehead with her soft fingers, and spoke to him.

"You make me very sad," she almost whispered. "I would that you might be loved as you deserve love—that one more worthy than I might give you all I cannot give."

He opened his dark eyes that were now dull and weary, and he looked up to her face.

"There is none more worthy than you," he answered in low and broken tones.

"Hush," she said gently, "there are many. Will you forgive me—and forget me? Will you blot out this hour from your remembrance, and go forth and do those great and noble deeds which you came into the world to perform? There is none greater than you, none nobler, none more generous."

Darius lifted his head from her knee, and sprang to his feet.

"I will do all things, but I will not forget," he said. "I will do the great and the good deeds,—for you. I will be generous, for you; noble, for you; while the world lasts my deeds shall endure; and with them, the memory that they were done for you! Grant me only one little thing."

"Ask anything—everything," answered Nehushta, in troubled tones.

"Nehushta, you know how truly I love you—

nay, I will not be mad again; fear not! Tell me this—tell me that if you had not loved Zoroaster, you would have loved me."

Nehushta blushed deeply and then turned pale. She rose to her feet, and took the king's outstretched hands.

"Indeed, indeed, you are most worthy of love—Darius, I could have loved you well." Her voice was very low, and the tears stood in her eyes.

"The grace of the All-Wise God bless thee!" cried the king, and it was as though a sudden bright light shone upon his face. Then he kissed her two hands fervently, and with one long look into her sorrowful eyes, he turned and left her.

But no man saw the king that day, nor did any know where he was, saving the two spearmen who stood at the door of his chamber. Within, he lay upon his couch, dry-eyed and stark, staring at the painted carvings of the ceiling.

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